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# IRAQ'S SHIA WARLORDS AND THEIR MILITIAS: POLITICAL AND SECURITY CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

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Norman Cigar



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THEIR MILITIAS:  
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**Norman Cigar**

**June 2015**

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## FOREWORD

The phenomenon of Iraq's Shia warlords and the militias they lead has significant implications for the conduct of the war against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), including for U.S. policy interests and for U.S. Landpower forces deployed in-country.

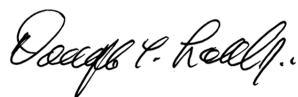
In this monograph, Dr. Norman Cigar analyzes the rapid resurgence of the Shia militias and the warlords thanks to a mass popular mobilization in response to the severe ISIS threat to the country in 2014. The militias have played a key role in helping to stabilize the situation on the ground, while the Iraqi Army has been rebuilding with the help of the international Coalition. At the same time, the warlords have become significant political players who have an impact on issues of interest to the United States, such as sectarian reconciliation and the formation of a National Guard in Sunni areas, which have implications for the future of Iraq's security and stability.

Dr. Cigar focuses on the interests, policies, operations, and capabilities of the warlords and the militias they command, and highlights that they are embedded in operations with the Iraqi Army and national police. Knowing as much as possible about these militias takes on added importance, given the significant U.S. military contribution to the fight against ISIS in the form of air support, training, planning assistance, intelligence sharing, and logistics—including a key landpower element—operating with the presence of the Shia militias on the same battlefield. The militias are significant, in particular, for force protection and operational security issues in relation to the deployed U.S. forces.



A key conclusion of this monograph is that, because of the continuing need for their participation in the fight against ISIS as the Iraqi Army is rebuilt, and the warlords' growing political power as well as the popularity they have gained from their victories, the warlords and the militias are likely to remain a significant factor for the foreseeable future. In addition, the ascendancy of the Shia warlords and militias are likely to provide Iran with greater access and influence in Iraq. At the operational level, the monograph points to the need for deconfliction to avoid friendly-fire incidents that could escalate, given the militias' traditional hostility and suspicion of U.S. motives, as well as continuing attention to operational security and force protection.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this monograph as part of its continuing effort to inform discussions on dealing with the ongoing ISIS threat and security issues in Iraq. This analysis should be useful to help strategic leaders, planners, intelligence professionals, and commanders to better understand the challenges of the contemporary strategic landscape in the Middle East and to craft effective responses.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NORMAN CIGAR is a Research Fellow at the Marine Corps University, Quantico, VA, from which he retired recently as Director of Regional Studies and the Minerva Research Chair. Previously, he had also taught at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College and at the Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting. In an earlier assignment, he spent 7 years as a senior political-military analyst in the Pentagon, where he was responsible for the Middle East in the Office of the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, and supported the Secretary of the Army, the Chief of Staff of the Army, and Congress with intelligence. He also represented the Army on national-level intelligence issues in the interagency intelligence community. During the Gulf War, he was the Army's senior political-military intelligence staff officer on the Desert Shield/Desert Storm Task Force. Dr. Cigar is the author of numerous works on politics and security issues dealing with the Middle East and the Balkans, and has been a consultant at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the Hague. He has also taught at the National Intelligence University and was a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution, George Mason University. Among his writings are *Al-Qa'ida's Doctrine for Insurgency* and *Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government. Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle*. Dr. Cigar holds a Certificate from the Middle East Institute, Columbia University; an M.S.S.I. from the National Intelligence University; an M.I.A. from the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University; and a D.Phil. from Oxford (St. Antony's College) in Middle East history and Arabic. He has studied and traveled widely in the Middle East.



## SUMMARY

As America's de facto co-belligerents who often share the same battlespace in the fight against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the presence and activity of Iraq's Shia warlords and their militias have an impact on U.S. interests and policies at both the strategic and operational levels. The practical objective of this monograph is to provide a better understanding of the Shia militia phenomenon and to highlight the factors with which U.S. policymakers and U.S. Army planners and commanders will have to deal with respect to operations in Iraq.

The appearance and rapid advance in 2014 of ISIS, or the Islamic State as it calls itself, and the security crisis that resulted in Iraq also engendered a mushrooming in the size and role of the Shia militias in Iraq and has resulted in the unprecedented importance and status of the warlords who lead them. With the re-energizing of the pre-existing militias and the creation of new ones as part of a mass mobilization, this force has played a significant role in most of the campaigns, helping to stem and then turn the ISIS tide, thanks to its religious commitment, Iranian support, and previous experience gained by some fighters in Syria.

The militias are embedded in mainstream society, and the warlords who lead them are also political and often religious leaders and have emerged as power-brokers in the country's political system in their own right. Not only have the militias had an impact on the battlefield, but the warlords have also shaped policies on such issues as the formation of a National Guard in the Sunni areas, whether to target ISIS in urban areas, whether to rehabilitate the Baathists, and whether to establish détente with the Gulf States; they have also

hindered reconciliation with the Sunni community, which is needed in order to weaken ISIS's appeal in that community.

As the U.S. Landpower footprint increases, planners and commanders must remain sensitive to the integrated position the warlords and the militias have in Iraq's security system and the fact that the militias are embedded in military operations with the Army and police. As such, their presence and influence must be considered in U.S. decisionmaking, and the appropriate conditions and limits on operational cooperation, intelligence sharing, and logistic support to the Iraqi forces must be determined. In particular, the warlords have often displayed hostility to U.S. interests and could represent a potential force protection concern to any U.S. ground presence. Given the militias' links with Iran, Iranian hostility to U.S. policies or a degradation in U.S.-Iranian relations could increase the risk to deployed personnel. Iraqis perceive a continuing need for the militias in the effort against ISIS for some time to come, given the requirement to rebuild the Army after its earlier poor showing against ISIS and its history of corruption, politicization, and neglect. Combined with this need, the recent rise in the warlords' popularity and legitimacy is likely to ensure an ongoing role for them in Iraq's security and political life for the foreseeable future.

# IRAQ'S SHIA WARLORDS AND THEIR MILITIAS: POLITICAL AND SECURITY CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

## INTRODUCTION

The appearance and rapid advance of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State, as it calls itself, in 2014 and the security crisis that resulted in Iraq also engendered a mushrooming in the size and role of the Shia militias in Iraq and has resulted in the unprecedented importance and status of the warlords who lead them. As such, these militias have become a significant part of the country's security and political landscape that one cannot ignore, and they are likely to remain a factor to contend with for some time to come. Moreover, if not allies, the Shia militias have become for Washington at least co-belligerents in what one can justly term the ISIS War.

Unavoidably, in Iraq's dynamic political and security situation, details about the militias will evolve rapidly, and, at most, one can only portray a snapshot of the situation. However, what one can do is identify and analyze the factors and trends as of this writing—February 2015—that one can expect to persist and to draw conclusions on that basis. Ultimately, the practical objective of this monograph is to provide a better understanding of the Shia militia phenomenon and highlight the factors with which U.S. policymakers and U.S. Army planners and commanders will have to deal. Given the already significant U.S. ground presence in Iraq, Americans will have to interact with the Shia militias both strategically at the political level and operationally on the battlefield. As such, it is im-

portant to understand the militias' identity, objectives, strategic and operational impact, and the implications for U.S. Landpower forces and political decision-makers involved in Iraqi affairs.

What to call these Shia military formations is, in itself, a controversial issue in Iraq. The militias and their supporters label themselves generically as "*Al-Hashd Al-Shabi*" (the Popular Mobilization or *Levée en Masse*), "the Islamic Resistance" (*al-muqawama al-islamiya*), "the Volunteers" (*al-mutatawwiun*), or the *mujahidin*. Detractors refer to them as "militias" (*milishiyat*), which, in Iraq, has a pejorative connotation equivalent to "gangs." Here the general term, "militias," will be used in the English-language sense as a descriptive of such organizations without any negative implication, equivalent to the generic "*Al-Hashd Al-Shabi*" or just "Al-Hashd" in the Iraqi texts.

### **The Militias' Early Years.**

Shia militias have been a political-military factor in Iraq ever since the overthrow of the Saddam regime in 2003 and were often at odds with the U.S. presence in the country, many times resulting in clashes with the U.S. armed forces, as well as with the Sunni community and the local government. Although the U.S.-led Coalition had managed to control such militias, often after hard-fought campaigns in which the militias many times took heavy casualties, the latter continued to exist, even if only in a reduced form.

With a diminishing of the jihadist Sunni threat after 2008 and the imminent departure of U.S. forces, militia force structures were reduced. During the succeeding "quiet years," some militias, such as the Mahdi Army (*Jaysh Al-Mahdi*) led by Muqtada Al-

Sadr, reverted largely to a reserve status, while in the case of the *Badr* militia, many of its personnel were integrated into the country's security forces. Other militias continued to operate more actively, as was true of the Units of the Righteous People (*Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq*), the latter, with the tacit blessing of and often in close coordination with the security forces in Sunni areas where they were accused of a pattern of crimes against civilians, contributing a significant grievance against Al-Maliki's Shia-majority government and armed forces and feeding Sunni resistance and a willingness to cooperate with ISIS.<sup>1</sup> Some of the Iraqi militias' cadres were also receiving further training in Iran or Lebanon during this operational lull. Some of the militias, such as *Badr* and *Ahl Al-Haqq*, continued to operate in Al-Anbar province at Prime Minister Al-Maliki's request as part of the campaign against Sunni dissidents.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Syrian Interlude.**

After the outbreak of the Arab Spring in neighboring Syria in 2011 and the rise of Al-Qaida activity there, many of the Iraqi militias revived their activity as they deployed personnel to fight on behalf of the Asad regime. Rather than being motivated by any devotion to the secular Baathist Asad regime, it was the possibility of victory by Sunni Islamist forces that was seen as a threat to Shia shrines in Syria and to Shia interests in general that provided the impetus. It was reportedly the commander of the Quds Division, the unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) responsible for foreign operations, Major General Qasim Sulaymani, who had ordered the *Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq* and other Iraqi militia elements loyal to Iran to



deploy to Syria. According to the media, these units were armed and trained in Iraq and Iran under Quds supervision, and subsequently crossed Iraq to Syria, with the Iranian embassy in Baghdad coordinating the effort. Almost 5,000 fighters were said to have gone to Syria, with most of the existing militias represented.<sup>3</sup> Iraqi Shia clerics encouraged such volunteers, and the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki tacitly endorsed and supported such deployments, while government officials attended public memorial services for those who fell in Syria.<sup>4</sup> Transit was no doubt facilitated by the fact that Hadi Al-Amiri, head of the Badr Force militia and a long-time Iranian ally, at the time was Iraq's Minister of Transportation.<sup>5</sup>

The intensity of the combat operations against the Al-Qaida-backed *Jabhat Al-Nusra* and ISIS in Syria is suggested by the fact that one militia, *Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq*, acknowledged having lost 300 fighters in just one engagement extending over several days in the Damascus area.<sup>6</sup> Iraqi militia leaders often established their credibility in the Syrian theater, as was the case with Falih Al-Khazali, then a leader in the Iraqi *Hizb Allah* (who subsequently broke away to establish the *Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada'* militia as a separate organization), who lost an eye in the fighting in Syria.

### **Responding to the ISIS War: The Militias Are Re-energized.**

The current resurgence of the militias can be traced to the ascent in 2013-14 of the local Al-Qaida branch – originally The Islamic State in Iraq, later renamed The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL), and renamed once again as the Islamic State in June 2014 when it broke with Al-Qaida.

Thanks to the experience and arms gained from fighting against the Asad regime in Syria and the political alliances it contracted with dissident Sunni elements (tribes, Saddam-era Baathists, military officers, and non-Al-Qaida jihadists) seething against what they termed a repressive Shia-dominated Baghdad government, ISIS was able to make rapid territorial advances in Iraq in 2014, which was facilitated by the collapse of Iraq's security forces. This expansion was accompanied by massacres and expulsions of Shia military personnel and civilians, as well as the destruction of Shia shrines and religious institutions in the areas that ISIS seized, creating a national crisis that marked a turning point in both the country's history and in the fortunes of the militias. In effect, the country's majority Shia community, which was at greatest risk from ISIS, saw it had few, if any, other options for its survival in the face of a disintegrating Iraqi Army patently unable to stop ISIS. Likewise, the Iraqi government, then still led by Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, could find no other immediate expedient to try to stem the ISIS onslaught than the existing Shia militias. When two combat-hardened militia units returned from Syria to Iraq in June 2014, the beleaguered government immediately deployed them to the front lines.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, it was the country's most senior Shia religious figure, Ali Al-Sistani, known as the Authority (Al-Marja, or his office as Al-Marjaiya), who provided the mechanism for an enormous and rapid expansion of the militias. Reacting to the vehemently anti-Shia acts by ISIS in the recently conquered areas and its stated intent to march to the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, on June 13, 2014, Al-Sistani promulgated a fatwa, or religious opinion, declaring a jihad incumbent on the community as a whole (*ji-*

*had kifa'i*). This call triggered a *levée en masse* within the Shia community, what came to be known as *Al-Hashd Al-Shabi*.

## DEVELOPING THE MILITIAS

Thanks to the flood of new recruits generated by Al-Sistani's call-up, existing militias were vastly increased, while new militia units were also formed. Raising, financing, and training the new recruits marked a cooperative effort among the existing militias, the Iraqi government, the Shia religious establishment, and the Shia tribes. For example, in the Basra area, recruits – often by tribal contingent – reported to the police stations, while it was the Basra local government that provided money to outfit the volunteers.

### **Mobilization.**

At first, there was no real mechanism in place to process the volunteers. Ten times more volunteers came forward than the government had anticipated or wanted. Of the million-plus who stepped forward, Prime Minister Al-Ibadi (sometimes spelled Al-Abadi), who replaced Al-Maliki after the latter's ouster in September 2014, later confirmed that "Only a small number of them were used, since it was not possible to use all of them."<sup>8</sup> Most initial volunteers probably were deemed unfit for duty, have ended up in home guard duties, or may well have returned home after the initial outburst of zeal. Actual numbers on the ground are hard to determine. According to one local official, there were over 17,000 volunteers committed on various fronts by September 2014, while *Hay'at Al-Hashd Al-Shabi* reported 60,000 in the field in late-

2014.<sup>9</sup> A hostile senior Iraqi political figure reported in January 2015 that the militias had 250,000 men in its force structure (perhaps considering active and reserve/home guard personnel), with plans to double that force structure within 6 months.<sup>10</sup> A *Badr* commander, for his part, claimed by the end of 2014 that there were 100,000 militia fighters.<sup>11</sup> Tallies may depend on how one counts committed and supporting forces, including militia reservists, home guards, and part-time personnel. Determining the total strength is even more difficult, with few militias providing end strength figures, such as the Saraya Ashura', which claimed to have 50,000 personnel, and the Al-Abbas Division that claimed 5,000 fighters, with at least 3,000 more in its reserve component.<sup>12</sup> What is significant is the impact that the infusion of so many new volunteers was to have on the battlefield.

In particular, volunteers who joined new units—such as the Abbas Division sponsored by the central Shia religious shrine, *Al-Ataba Al-Husayniya*, in Karbala—often came from specific areas, in the latter case, from Karbala and the Basra area.<sup>13</sup> Shia tribes served as significant manpower pools and provided a recruitment mechanism, as in Babil province, where tribes set up volunteer recruitment centers, with entire tribal contingents volunteering and tribal shaykhs sometimes leading the volunteers.<sup>14</sup> For example, in Al-Muthanna province, the tribes had supplied some 1,200 volunteers initially and sent more subsequently.<sup>15</sup> The Muntafida tribes, for their part, contributed 5,000 volunteers.<sup>16</sup> The raising and deployment of militia units has been a continuing process, and in late October 2014, one militia warlord, Ammar Al-Hakim, called for the formation of additional militia units to guard the shrines in Karbala and Najaf.<sup>17</sup> In January

2015, Dhi Qar province sent 750 fighters as reinforcements to the militias operating in Diyala.<sup>18</sup> As mixed areas were retaken from ISIS, more local Shia were said to have joined the militias, as in Salah Al-Din province, where hundreds were reported to have volunteered, according to an Iraqi government minister, and 3,000 after the town of Al-Muqdadiya in Diyala was retaken.<sup>19</sup> In early-2015, in fact, the militias organized by the senior Shia religious establishment, the Ataba, announced the opening of new recruitment centers throughout the country.<sup>20</sup>

### **Training and Readiness.**

Since 2014, the militias have developed as a three-tiered force. First, there was the experienced nucleus, which had existed before the call-up; second, there were the recent volunteers who lacked any real training or combat experience; and, third, there was a reserve component, part of which also served as a local home guard. As one could expect, pre-existing militias, thanks to their experienced cadres and personnel and standing organizational structure, were able to take greatest advantage of the mobilization and have been the most prominent on the battlefield ever since.

According to Hadi Al-Amiri (as commander of *Badr*), the initial influx of volunteers brought in many with no training, who could not be sent immediately to the front. The Badr Force dealt with the influx of volunteers by sorting them by level of experience and provided training to the neophytes.<sup>21</sup> As Al-Amiri reports, Iranian teams participated in their training, and he claims the Iranians trained 60 percent of the volunteers.<sup>22</sup>

At times, the training was rudimentary, such as the 2-week course for a newly raised unit, Al-Hakim's *Fawj Al-Imam Al-Baqir*, itself part of the larger *Saraya Ashura'* unit, composed mostly of tribesmen and refugees.<sup>23</sup> The initial training for the new volunteers in Karbala', on the other hand, took place at the provincial Police Academy.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, a unit that the Shia charitable foundation (*Waqf*) raised was trained at the Najaf provincial Police Academy.<sup>25</sup> The *Saraya Ashura'* militia was trained and armed by the national police.<sup>26</sup> At times, individual militias provided training for their own volunteers, as in the case of the *Saraya Al-Salam*, although in some cases, the latter provided recruits with only a single day of training.<sup>27</sup> The *Badr* militia, with its advantage of combat experience, also provided cadres for other newly formed militia units, which contributed a particular focus on military operations in urban terrain (MOUT).<sup>28</sup> In general, new fighters were probably expected to learn on the job, operating alongside more experienced veterans. More recently, at least some volunteers have gone through longer training courses, such as the 3,200 graduates of a 3-months course they completed in January 2015.<sup>29</sup>

As suggested already, most personnel may be serving as home guards. A militia unit in its entirety could have the permanent role of a home guard, or an individual committed militia could have its own reserve component, as in Najaf, where some 3,000 fighters were mobilized for the specific mission of defending the city, or for temporary guard duty, as when the *Abbas Division* called up 3,000 of its reserves to provide security for the upcoming Ashura religious festival in Karbala.<sup>30</sup> Some reservists were expected to be able to respond quickly, as was the case when Muqtada Al-Sadr ordered the *Saraya Al-Salam* reserves in Al-Muth-

anna province to be ready with a 48-hour notice.<sup>31</sup> Indicative of the gravity of the ISIS threat in the early period, the Supreme Islamic Council had even provided arms handling training to women volunteers in Najaf.<sup>32</sup> In January 2015, plans were also reported for a women's contingent to support the militias with food preparation and medical care for the upcoming operation to liberate Mosul.<sup>33</sup>

### **Equipping and Maintaining the Militias.**

Often, the financial and other support the government promised has fallen short of the militias' expectations, creating recurring problems. The central government has provided the bulk of the militias' funding since the call-up of 2014, and had already spent \$1 billion on the militias by late-2014, although when the Finance Minister (a Kurd) revealed the expense, it aroused a storm of protest from militia supporters, who accused him of seeking to sabotage the project with his revelations.<sup>34</sup> However, the actual payment of salaries and benefits to the intended beneficiaries has proven to be a major problem, with fighters often complaining of not receiving any pay for months at a time, if at all.

Grumbling soon also arose about shortages of food, drinking water, equipment, and ammunition.<sup>35</sup> As one Army source acknowledged, militias often were said to have a more reliable logistics system than did the Army, which often neglected to provide even food to the militias.<sup>36</sup> To be sure, even the Army often suffers from such negligence, as in one typical case when the Army, as well as the militias, was receiving food unfit for human consumption as a result of government corruption dating from Al-Maliki's time, and the

Army itself was often buying food from the private sector.<sup>37</sup> The established militias already had equipment, at least for their core members and, aside from personal arms, their arsenals included crew-served weapons, ranging to heavy machine guns, mortars, and rocket launchers, with four-wheel-drive vehicles as the preferred mode of transport. Thanks to subsequent acquisitions through government transfers and capture from ISIS, their arsenals now include artillery, self-propelled air defense guns, High Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicles (HUMVEES), and other armor, including even tanks. New militias complained of the limited supply of arms and munitions that the government provided, obliging some fighters to buy their own weapons on the open market.<sup>38</sup> Eventually, some militia units were able to seize arms from ISIS, in some cases, arms of U.S. origin that ISIS had originally seized from the Army and paraded that fact, no doubt embarrassing the latter.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, operations with the Army often also gave rise to militia discontent. Some volunteers were said to have returned home after seeing the unprofessional Iraqi Army with which they were expected to operate, including exercising “poorly thought-out plans.”<sup>40</sup> The militias also blamed the Army with providing shoddy medical support and poor covering fire, while accusing Sunni officers of hedging their bets with ISIS.<sup>41</sup>

This lack of support has often resulted in degraded morale and protests by individual fighters. Already in July 2014, hundreds of volunteers blocked the main road between two provinces and pelted the local Member of Parliament’s convoy with rocks in protest for not receiving any pay, while other angry volunteers refused to go into battle. Demonstrations on a



large scale over the same issue were repeated in Diyala province in September 2014.<sup>42</sup> Some volunteers returned home, even abandoning positions on the front lines, for that reason.<sup>43</sup> Others, such as 200 personnel from one militia unit, continued to drain away over time, citing the lack of pay and family benefits.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, some fighters complained that certain categories in the militias, such as individuals who are simultaneously government employees or politicians' security guards or those who belong to the warlords' political parties, were more likely to get paid than were ordinary volunteers.<sup>45</sup> The hardship caused by sporadic or no pay was heightened by the fact that members from poor families, many of whose youth had been unemployed and in need of salaries, constituted the majority of the new volunteers, as was argued by a delegation from Babil province to the Baghdad government.<sup>46</sup>

The government repeatedly recognized its responsibility to pay the militia fighters, as when it reaffirmed publicly in November 2014 its commitment to grant the families of militiamen killed in action the same benefits as military personnel. Prime Minister Al-Ibadi reportedly had to intervene personally with the bureaucracy to begin to get arrears paid.<sup>47</sup> In part, embezzlement by senior officials—especially during the Al-Maliki era—within the agency tasked with supporting the militias was to blame for the problems, with funds diverted for private purposes.<sup>48</sup> According to some Members of Parliament, political favoritism also plays a role, with some militia units receiving their full pay while others do not, depending on the individual warlord's clout.<sup>49</sup> Even the commander of the Iraqi *Hizb Allah* militia complained that salaries and benefits were paid erratically and

were influenced by how much political clout a militia could exert.<sup>50</sup> The country's chronic bureaucratic mismanagement no doubt is also to blame for shortfalls in support.

The militias' backers in political and religious circles have often had to resort to lobbying on the militias' behalf. For example, the Shia religious establishment – including at the highest levels – repeatedly has exerted pressure on the government to support the volunteers with pay, food, weapons, and equipment, which has also been the case with local governments and other prominent religious leaders.<sup>51</sup> Local governments, the parent militia organizations, and Shia foundations frequently have filled the shortfall in support given to the fighters for those militias they sponsored or who came from their areas. For example, the provincial government of Basra provided 40b Dinars (\$3.4 million) to equip the volunteers initially.<sup>52</sup> The Shia *Waqf*, for its part, sent food to both the Army and the militias in the field at Samarra, and set up field bakeries and a water-treatment facility for them.<sup>53</sup>

## **Organization.**

In terms of organization, Prime Minister Al-Maliki (who at the time was also Minister of the Interior) placed the old and new militias initially in a newly-created structure, the Popular Hashd Agency (*Hay'at Al-Hashd Al-Shabi*), within the Ministry of the Interior. However, the agency was faced with managing a coalition of individual jealously autonomist militias, and its function has been mainly in terms of funding and benefits, as well as serving as a coordinating mechanism for policy with other government and security agencies, while the Army was tasked to

provide logistics and other combat support. As any bureaucratic organization would, the Hay'a has lobbied frequently for a larger budget on behalf of its constituency.<sup>54</sup> The Director of the Hay'a agency is Falih Al-Fayyad, who is also the country's National Security Adviser (and an Al-Maliki holdover), while Abu Al-Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the Deputy Director, is also the number-two man in the *Badr* organization and, as of February 2015, another *Badr* commander, was made the Hay'a's spokesman. In the new government led by Prime Minister Al-Ibadi following Al-Maliki's ouster in September 2014, ultimate responsibility for this agency went to Muhammad Al-Ghabban, the new Minister of the Interior, who is a leading figure in the *Badr* militia. According to the Minister of the Interior, militias operated under the command and control of his Ministry, but enjoyed delegated authority in liberated areas.<sup>55</sup>

### **Who Are the Militias and the Warlords?**

There may be over 50 Shia militias by now, varying in size, regional affiliation, political orientation, objectives, and importance. At times, there can be intense rivalry between militias and, in the past, these differences often led to armed clashes between competing warlords. There are indications that Iran can and at times has intervened with some militias to deal with leadership issues which, along with control of turf, are more significant than ideological ones.<sup>56</sup> The following are among the most significant militias – some old, some new.

## The Militias.

Leadership competition, rather than ideology or strategy, divides the pro-Iranian militias, over most of which Iran has influence rather than control. Tehran may see advantages in this, as it is easier to deal with several smaller competing dependent militias than with a single large one.

### *Militias Allied to Iran.*

*Quwwat Badr* (Badr Force). Originally established in Iran and used against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, it was the military wing of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (renamed the Supreme Islamic Council in 2007). The Badr Force, under Hadi Al-Amiri, broke off from the Council in 2012 following leadership disputes. It is reported to be close to Iran's Quds Division and the latter's commander, General Sulaymani.

*Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq* (Units of the Righteous People). Its leader, cleric Qays Al-Khazali, broke from Muqtada Al-Sadr's *Jaysh Al-Mahdi* militia in 2007 when the latter stood down, taking 3,000 personnel with him to form the new militia.

*Iraqi Hizb Allah*. It is closely linked to Lebanese *Hizb Allah* and Iran.

*Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada'* (The Greatest Martyr Battalions). Broke off from *Iraqi Hizb Allah* in 2013, led by cleric Shaykh Abu Mustafa Al-Shibani and by Falih Al-Khazali. It is a close ally of Iran and of the Quds Division, and its website features prominently an image of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i.

*Kata'ib Al-Tayyar Al-Risali* (The Missionary Movement Battalions). Emerged from Al-Sadr's *Jaysh*

*Al-Mahdi*, and is led by cleric Shaykh Adnan Al-Shamhani. It is a close ally of Iran and of the Quds Division, and its website includes an image of Iran's former leader, Ayatollah Rouhallah Khomeini.

*Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali* (The Imam Ali Battalions). Led by Shibl Al-Zaydi, a former follower of Al-Sadr. Al-Zaydi has a close personal relationship with General Sulaymani. It prides itself on special forces operations.

*Jaysh Al-Mukhtar* (Al-Mukhtar's Army). Established in 2013 by the former head of the Iraqi *Hizb Allah*, cleric Wathiq Al-Battat (killed in action in December 2014).

*Militias Sympathetic or Not Hostile to, but Independent from, Iran.*

Other militias, while willing to cooperate with Tehran, see themselves as having their own sources of religious legitimacy and emphasize their independence.

*Saraya Al-Salam* (The Peace Companies). Its leader, cleric Hujjat al-Islam (a lesser degree of Shia cleric than an ayatollah) Muqtada Al-Sadr, set up *Saraya Al-Salam* in 2014, amalgamating some personnel from his other militia units and incorporating new recruits, while also retaining his pre-existing *Liwa' Al-Yawm Al-Mawud* (The Judgment Day Brigade). In February 2015, Al-Sadr "froze" his militias' operations temporarily, but that may have been a political maneuver on his part.

*Saraya Ashura'* (The Ashura' Companies). The Supreme Islamic Council, led by cleric Ammar Al-Hakim, formed this militia in 2014, although some cadres were available from earlier units.

The two Ataba-s, that is, the two central Shia religious establishments in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, raised their own militia units in 2014, such as Karbala's *Firqat Al-Abbas Al-Qitaliya* (Al-Abbas Combat Division), which remained directly subordinate to the Shia clerics and which they supported with logistics.<sup>57</sup>

Some militia units are composed largely of refugees, such as the *Liwa' Al-Imam Al-Husayn* (Imam Al-Husayn Brigade), composed of the Shia refugees who had fled the ISIS seizure of Tell Afar in Naynawa province, a 300-man unit of Christian refugees attached to the *Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali*, and another unit of Shabak refugees.<sup>58</sup> In early-2015, 1,500 more Shia refugees were being trained in militia camps to join the 6,000 that had preceded them in preparation for the anticipated campaign to retake Mosul.<sup>59</sup>

Other militia units have had the character of home guards for local defense, as was the case of *Sariyat Al-Taff Al-Qitaliya* (Al-Taff Combat Company), raised specifically "to defend the city of Karbala and its holy shrines."<sup>60</sup> The Shia *Waqf* also raised a 4,000-man force whose mission was primarily to protect the holy sites in Najaf and Kufa and to provide local security for the annual religious festivals. This unit cooperated operationally with the Badr Force and coordinated with the Najaf police.<sup>61</sup> Yet another militia unit in Karbala was trained by the Army for a "limited mission," that of uprooting "ISIS gangs" and sleeper cells.<sup>62</sup>

### *Marginal Militias.*

Outside the mainstream, there are also smaller, more extreme militias—often with a millenarian worldview—who have not participated in the war against ISIS. Although limited in size, these militias

are, nevertheless, a fanatical and unpredictable element, especially at the local level, and are potentially disruptive because of their apocalyptic outlook. Such militias include the *Jund Al-Sama'* (The Army of Heaven) and the *Ansar Al-Mahdi* (The Mahdi's Partisans), both of whom seek to overthrow the existing Shia religious hierarchy and replace it with their own prophetic movements. Of late, another similar militia, *Jaysh Al-Husayn* (Husayn's Army)—led by Mahmud Al-Sarkhi, a self-proclaimed grand ayatollah with a millenarian outlook, who has hinted that he is the expected Mahdi and the rightful leader of the Shia—has been particularly troublesome, sparking confrontations with the former Al-Maliki government. Al-Sarkhi is vehemently opposed both to Iraq's Shia religious establishment and to Iran, as well as to the United States, and rejected Al-Sistani's 2014 mobilization call. The Al-Maliki government cracked down violently on Al-Sarkhi in clashes in July 2014, but his followers are still on the ground.<sup>63</sup> He controls perhaps 25,000-30,000 followers, and his stronghold is in Nasiriya.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Militia Warlords.**

The militias are not marginalized armed gangs. Rather, the militias and those who control them—warlords for all intents and purposes—are embedded in mainstream society. No matter how radical their positions and actions may seem to outside observers, there is considerable truth in the claim by the country's Minister of the Interior that the militias are “an inseparable element of Iraq's fabric.”<sup>65</sup> Although not all the militia leaders actually command field operations or have equal power, they are nevertheless treated with deference by Army and police commanders,

even if a sense of competition and resentment may also be present. Warlords have regular policy discussions with government officials at the highest levels on issues that are not limited to just militia affairs. Moreover, far from being ostracized by senior religious authorities, warlords often meet with and are welcomed by the latter. Indicative of the established position the militias have in Iraq's socio-political system is the fact that any criticism results in figures from all public sectors leaping to their defense. Opponents of the militias also have to face the militias' supporters in Parliament, who accuse such critics of being "un-Iraqi" and of "lacking any sense of patriotism."<sup>66</sup>

The militia warlords not only have a role in military affairs but have also emerged as powerbrokers in the country's political system in their own right, thanks to an interlocking and reinforcing system of functions they perform. In a very real sense, the militia warlords **are** the government, through the political parties they control and the Members of Parliament and government officials at both the national and local levels who are affiliated to those parties or who even themselves belong to the parties' military wing; and this control is, moreover, quite apart from the direct role in political life that the warlords play personally. Warlords often can count on networks of loyalists at the national and local levels who may themselves be influential political figures, government officials, military and police officers, or clerics. In fact, warlords can be especially powerful at the local level, where they may well be dominant, or at least have a significant presence in a particular city's administration, police, religious infrastructure, and economy.

At the national level, for example, members of *Badr* include the Ministers of Municipalities, Human



Rights, Interior, and Communications, as well as the Deputy Director of the Al-Hashd Al-Shabi Agency. The Ministers of Transportation, Oil, and Youth on the other hand, are from the Supreme Islamic Council. The country's Deputy Prime Minister, Baha' Al-Araji, is a member of Al-Sadr's party, as are three Ministers. Officials from militia-linked parties are also embedded throughout the national government in other positions of influence. Thus, a Member of Parliament who belongs to Al-Sadr's party is also a member on the Finance Committee in Parliament and has been influential in shaping the country's budget. Shaykh Humam Al-Hammudi, the number-two man in the Supreme Islamic Council, is also the chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee in Parliament and is Parliament's Deputy Speaker.

Highlighting the interpenetration of institutions, government officials who belong to political parties that sponsor the militias have themselves often operated in the field with the militias.

While the case of Al-Amiri may have been the most striking, others have done so as well. For example, the Minister of Municipalities, Abd Al-Karim Yunis Al-Ansari, who is also the Assistant Secretary General of the Badr Party, supported the militias not only by visiting fielded units and providing them with equipment, supplies, and water, but he also participated in operations.<sup>67</sup> Falih Al-Khazali, a leader of the *Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada'* militia, is also a Member of Parliament and periodically dons his militia uniform to inspect his fighters at the front. Likewise, Badr Party sitting Members of Parliament have served as militia field commanders, while others—such as the leader of *Badr's* parliamentary caucus—also made a show of appearing at the front in uniform.<sup>68</sup> The Secretary-General of the *Kata'ib Al-Tayyar Al-Risali* militia,

Shaykh Adnan Al-Shamhani, who is also a Member of Parliament, has likewise gone in uniform to inspect his fighters, as is displayed prominently on his organization's website. Before his appointment, Muhammad Al-Ghabban, as a top *Badr* figure and Member of Parliament, had himself joined the *Badr* militia in field operations during the summer of 2014 and, even after being appointed as the new Minister of the Interior in the Al-Ibadi government and assuming control of the agency responsible for the militias, was said to still be leading in the field at times, as in the campaign for Jurf Al-Sakhr.<sup>69</sup>

As such, warlords can operate in several dimensions with reinforcing linkages, often functioning as leaders not only in military operations, but also in political activity. Since some warlords are also significant Shia clerics and heads of a religious party or of a religious foundation, they may also be influential in the religious domain. To be sure, some warlords are primarily political and religious figures, leaving combat operations to subordinate commanders. Even those warlords who are not field commanders, such as cleric Ammar Al-Hakim, the head of the Supreme Islamic Council, or Muqtada Al-Sadr, are anxious to be seen in uniform in the field among their militia fighters. Other warlords, however, are themselves actual field commanders, as is the case with cleric Aya-tollah Qays Al-Khazali, who leads his *Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq* fighters from the front, and as was true of cleric Wathiq Al-Battat (killed in December 2014), who led the *Jaysh Al-Mukhtar* from the front. In fact, often it is not possible to distinguish which hat a warlord may be wearing—whether speaking as a military commander, politician, or religious figure—although that may not matter, except to underline the overlapping identities and sources of power of such warlords.

Warlords wheel and deal as equals with the government leadership, senior military commanders, tribal leaders, and foreign representatives, and Al-Hakim, for example, (and perhaps others) meets with the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq.<sup>70</sup> Many of the militias, in fact, can be considered as the armed wing of the political party to which they are attached and provide muscle for the latter. For example, Hadi Al-Amiri, the charismatic leader of the Badr Force, is also the head of the Badr Party organization, served as Minister of Transportation under Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, and is currently still a Member of Parliament. He has participated in major operations, and was prominent in the relief of the besieged town of Amirli (the first significant defeat for ISIS) and in the Jurf Al-Sakhr campaign, playing a key role in drafting plans as part of a joint force with the Army and the police. He deals as an equal player with Army and police commanders, tribal leaders, and national and local officials, and has visited and met with political, religious, and military figures in Iran.

Indicative of such power even in local politics, the Badr Force appointed one of its own as governor of Al-Azhim district after helping to expel ISIS from the area, while the militias are also reputed to run their own prisons.<sup>71</sup> Al-Sadr's supporters and the Supreme Islamic Council were said to be expanding their control over the local administration in central and southern Iraq.<sup>72</sup> Given the perception that it was the militias who were the decisive element in stopping ISIS, it is not surprising that militia warlords are also popular, at least among the Shia. In a man of the year contest for political figures at the end of 2014, for example, Qays Al-Khazali (as leader of the *Ahl Al-Haqq*) was the winner, with *Badr's* Al-Amiri coming in second.<sup>73</sup>

## The Militias and the Iranian Connection.

Support for the militias has become a key component of Tehran's policy in Iraq, which is facilitated by the fact that most—although not all—of Iraq's Shia militias have had a long-standing organizational and ideological relationship with Iran and, in the case of some of the warlords, an even longer personal tie. Al-Amiri, for example, was a commander of the *Badr* unit that fought on Tehran's side in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, while most other prominent *Badr* figures only returned to Iraq from Iran after the demise of Saddam Husayn in 2003. As noted already, over the years, Iran has provided arms and training to many of these militias through its Quds Division and, according to one Lebanese press source, in recent years some 20,000 Iraqis have been trained by the Quds division.<sup>74</sup>

In the more recent period, Iran has played an even more direct role for the Shia militias in Iraq. According to a Lebanese *Hizb Allah* report, General Sulaymani, the veteran commander of the Quds Division, accompanied by Iranian and Lebanese advisers, had landed at Baghdad's airport just hours after the fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014, where he was greeted by many of the Iraqi militia warlords.<sup>75</sup> Iran has stressed that its role is restricted to providing training and advice in Iraq.<sup>76</sup> Lebanese *Hizb Allah*, which has strong ties to Tehran, also deployed MOU and sniper experts who were used as trainers for volunteers in Iraq, helped with planning, and provided combat advice and expertise in areas such as defusing explosives.<sup>77</sup> Iran has also provided intelligence support, arms, munitions, and other equipment, and medical care in Tehran, as well as occasional air support both to the Iraqi government and to some of the militias directly. Signifi-

cantly, one of the militias' priorities had been to secure the main road between Diyala and the Iranian border because "That road is very important," according to the province's Chief of Police.<sup>78</sup>

In many ways, this support has been decisive, as the number-two man in *Badr*, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, claimed that "the only arms and equipment we received were from Iran [as opposed to the Coalition]" and "had it not been for those arms and support we would not have won those victories."<sup>79</sup> What is more, during the war against ISIS, General Sulaymani and his staff of advisers were said to have played a key role in planning and leading operations involving the Iraqi militias in all major campaigns. In January 2015, according to Al-Muhandis, there were "hundreds" of Iranian advisers.<sup>80</sup> According to *Badr's* official newspaper, *Jaridat Badr*, just in Diyala province, there were over 200 Iranian military advisers and fighters operating with the Kurdish Peshmerga – and no doubt also with the Shia militias deployed in the same area – and they were said to be especially active in helping to draft campaign plans.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, Al-Hakim complained that Iran was not included in the Coalition, insisting that Iran was needed for victory.<sup>82</sup>

In fact, as Al-Amiri put it, all victories by the militias had been "coordinated" with Sulaymani and members of IRGC.<sup>83</sup> A Lebanese *Hizb Allah* source noted that General Sulaymani "was present at all the major battles side-by-side with the fighters and was in radio contact with them, refining their plans and directing their movements, giving his orders to advance toward the enemy lines."<sup>84</sup> Other senior Iranian officers have also operated in Iraq, with at least three flag-rank officers killed in action – General Hamid Taqavi of the IRGC in December 2014, General Mahdi

Nawruzi from the paramilitary Basij militia (subordinate to the IRGC) in January 2015, and General Reza Hosseini Moghaddam of the IRGC in February 2015—indicating that senior Iranian personnel have operated at the front with the militias. While Al-Amiri has been careful to deny the presence of any Iranian combat troops in Iraq, he did acknowledge that Iran provided unspecified fire support.<sup>85</sup> The Iranian advisory role, as the spokesman for the *Hay'at Al-Hashd Al-Shabi* acknowledged, was continuing undiminished into 2015.<sup>86</sup>

Most Iraqi warlords have visited Iran recently and met with senior government and religious figures. Iraqi warlords have recognized and applauded Tehran's support. For example, Ammar Al-Hakim, while on a visit to Iran, praised Iran for its help and for "the significant role" it played in the fight against ISIS in terms of providing "key advice," logistics support, and planning and organizational help. In fact, he calculated that, without this help, ISIS would have occupied Arbil in Kurdistan.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, underlining the militias' view of the importance of Iran's role, at General Taqavi's memorial service in Tehran, Al-Amiri concluded that "Had it not been for Iran and Major General Sulaymani, Haydar Al-Ibadi's government would now be a government-in-exile."<sup>88</sup>

In functional terms, one can view some of the Iraqi militias as extensions of the Iranian security apparatus, while the close interaction with the militias also provides Tehran with a potent political tool with which to exert its influence in Iraq. In fact, Iraq's Vice-President Ayad Allawi has claimed that Iran has pressured the Iraqi government to expand the militias even more.<sup>89</sup> Although Iran does not directly control the militias, nevertheless, the shared experience and

dependence on Iranian support, within a context of often congruent interests, has engendered a genuine symbiosis over time. What is equally significant, as one can expect, Iraqi warlords and their staffs, as individuals, have often formed close personal ties with their Iranian counterparts.

Many militias are eager to highlight their ties to Iran as a means of solidifying their legitimacy. For example, *Badr* claimed to have had authority for its military activity from Khamene'i even before Al-Sistani's fatwa.<sup>90</sup> In fact, several warlords—including the leaders of *Ahl Al-Haqq*, *Iraqi Hizb Allah*, *Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada'*, and *Kata'ib Al-Tayyar Al-Risali*—openly recognize Iran's Ayatollah Khamene'i as God's representative on earth (*wali al-faqih*), providing a potent religious element of allegiance. Khamene'i also appears frequently in *Badr's* imagery, including on the death posters for its fallen fighters. For *Iraqi Hizb Allah*, there is an additional reinforcing link through the parent Lebanese *Hizb Allah* (indeed, both Iraqi and Lebanese *Hizb Allah* use the same yellow flag). For its part, the central Iraqi Shia establishment around Ayatollah Al-Sistani—and, by extension, the militias it has fielded—also has a warm relationship with Iran while retaining its own autonomy. On the other hand, Al-Sadr, though not openly hostile, is stand-offish toward Tehran, viewing his own family religious pedigree as sufficient legitimacy. Only the eccentric Al-Sayyid Al-Sarkhi Al-Hasani and his *Jaysh Al-Husayn* militia are vociferously anti-Iranian, and he called reliance on Iran “betting on . . . a losing horse,” since he claimed the latter is so weak, it would collapse in any confrontation.<sup>91</sup>

## THE MILITIAS' OPERATIONAL LEVEL SIGNIFICANCE – STEMMING THE DISASTER

Not surprisingly, the militias' performance on the battlefield has been key to their image and to the warlords' standing in the country's socio-political system. At the time of the *levée en masse*, the security situation in the fight against ISIS looked grave, if not fatal. The Army and police seemed to realize they needed the militias, even if only reluctantly, especially in the early days when ISIS seemed unstoppable.

With the Iraqi Army reeling and the very real threat to Baghdad and other parts of Iraq of an ISIS takeover in 2014, the response by the Shia militias probably "saved the day," and in many instances since then, the militias continued to make the difference between victory and defeat. In the first Iraqi counteroffensive, a joint force of security forces and militias (along with Iranian advisers) was able to relieve the besieged town of Amirli—the first victory after a series of humiliating defeats by ISIS. After Amirli, even ISIS recognized that they were now fighting a new war because of the mobilized militias, and one ISIS analyst remarked that even senior militia commanders had not held back, unlike the Iraqi Army commanders in the previous fighting elsewhere.<sup>92</sup>

That the militias played the central part in the Amirli operation is clear. Hadi Al-Amiri—then still the country's Minister of Transportation—was wearing his hat of Commander of the Badr Force when he deployed 2,000 *Badr* fighters to the Amirli area.<sup>93</sup> Once there, he took an active role, setting up a council as the coordinating mechanism between the Army and all the militias, and he himself served on the front lines.<sup>94</sup> It was he and his staff (supported by General



Sulaymani and his staff) who apparently drafted the overall operational plan for the relief of the town. A police spokesman at Amirli noted that Al-Amiri was in charge (*bi-qiyadat*) of the operation and that “Al-Amiri’s forces” also had “an obvious impact on liberating the nearby Al-Azhim area.”<sup>95</sup> In fact, it appears that Al-Amiri also supervised the subsequent clearing operation in northern Diyala province, where he was in charge not only of the militia units but also of the Army and police, and for which *Badr* claimed to have deployed 5,000 of its own fighters.<sup>96</sup> Again, the militias were said to have been key in the retaking of the town of Al-Muqdadiya, also in Diyala province.<sup>97</sup>

The militias also made the decisive difference in other victories over ISIS, as in the campaign to retake Jurf Al-Sakhr south of Baghdad from August-October 2014, which was described as the single biggest Iraqi operation since 2003. This is a key area whose control could have split Baghdad from the south as well as threatened the capital itself. The Islamic State, abetted by local Sunni communities, appeared to be succeeding in methodically encircling and cutting off Baghdad and, as of mid-2014, the Iraqi Army and police were finding it difficult to stop effectively the adversary in that area, and five Army commanders in charge of the operation had been relieved in a span of 2 months.<sup>98</sup> Al-Amiri (and the Iranian advisers) again played a key role in planning the campaign.<sup>99</sup> The militias’ willingness to slog it out in the swamps, rugged terrain, vegetation, and water barriers – all filled with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – in that region, as well as to fight in the well-fortified built-up areas, where the Army’s mechanized units could not operate effectively, was noticeable, as well as that militia personnel often led the way.<sup>100</sup> The veteran militia fighters with

experience against ISIS in Syria were especially effective in small-unit actions where initiative and leadership were key.

The militias also provided a reserve element for the defense of Baghdad, preparing to resist ISIS—including with suicide operations—if the Army failed to hold the city’s defensive belt. As one local *Saraya Al-Salam* commander noted, his fighters, in fact, had had more experience in MOUT than in mobile warfare in any event.<sup>101</sup> *Hizb Allah* apparently used its earlier experience preparing for the city’s defense, using engineers to erect berms covered with fires south of Baghdad with the intent of cutting ISIS’s logistics and taking away the latter’s mobility, noting this would provide time to react.<sup>102</sup>

Since then, the militias have continued to be prominent in virtually all the campaigns against ISIS, and the Iraqi media and government sources have always been careful to recognize the militias’ role alongside the Army and police in the official accounts. As one Iraqi military expert put it in October 2014, the “Islamic resistance” had “changed the course of the war and achieved outstanding victories;” and, he added, “If the resistance withdraws from the battlefield . . . the results in the situation do not bear thinking.”<sup>103</sup>

Initially, Iraqi Army officers had been dismissive and hostile to the new militia volunteers, claiming that many were over age, out of shape, and untrained, an attitude perhaps also fueled in part by professional pride and resentment of any competition.<sup>104</sup> Later, however, as the militias showed their worth, the Army was “amazed . . . by the ferocity with which we fought,” according to a commander in the Badr Force, and there were reports that the Army was full of praise for the militias.<sup>105</sup> As a police officer in Di-

yala province told a reporter, “We can’t hide the fact that, without the Shi’ite *Asa’ib* [*Ahl Al-Haqq*] militia’s help, Islamic State flags would be flying on top of the Baquba government headquarters now.”<sup>106</sup> The Iraqi media widely recognized the Shia volunteers as having been the decisive factor in defeating ISIS at Amirli and elsewhere.<sup>107</sup> Even a provincial Kurdish official in Diyala joined in the recognition, concluding that “Were it not for the militias, we would not be exercising government and politics in Baquba.”<sup>108</sup> Significantly, Prime Minister Al-Ibadi, in a meeting with militia commanders, praised the “major role” that the militias had played in the fighting, labelled their contribution “priceless,” and called them “the backbone of the security forces.”<sup>109</sup>

To be sure, as a Member of Parliament noted, it is difficult for militia units to operate effectively without the Army’s fire support and air power.<sup>110</sup> Iraqi *Hizb Allah* notes that there is intensive coordination with the Army and police, including in the sharing of intelligence, while the militias have provided intelligence for and helped coordinate Iraqi air strikes in most of the operations.<sup>111</sup> Al-Amiri has portrayed the Army and police in a supporting role to the militias, although that may well be an exaggeration.<sup>112</sup>

The militias not only coordinate operations with the Army, but in many cases are embedded in the planning process in joint operations rooms so that, in the case of Al-Amiri, the latter was aware of all future plans. These joint operations rooms with the Army have continued into 2015.<sup>113</sup> The militias also set up joint operations rooms with the Kurds.<sup>114</sup> For the January 2015 Diyala campaign, *Ahl Al-Haqq*, for example, was still coordinating closely with the army, police, and central and local governments.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, it was

made clear that the Army and militias often share the same headquarters, as when a Shia religious official visited a single location to inspect and to hear both the troops' and the militia fighters' complaints.<sup>116</sup> In January 2015, when a convoy conveying the Army's Commander of the Tigris Operations and Al-Amiri was attacked and the two narrowly missed being struck by an IED, they were carrying out a joint inspection tour of the Army and militia units.<sup>117</sup> The degree of coordination between the Army and police, however, has varied by theater and by individual militia, and at Samarra, there were separate Army and militia headquarters.<sup>118</sup>

In many ways, the militias have provided a valuable complement to the Army's conventional capabilities. As noted, at least some of the fighters and cadres had had training and intensive recent combat experience against ISIS in Syria, and some brought to the battlefield their own crew-served weapons such as artillery and rocket launchers as well as personal arms. On one occasion, *Hizb Allah* claimed to have rescued an Army unit by providing covering fire so it could withdraw after what the unit claimed was an errant Coalition air strike that had mistakenly hit near the Army unit's position instead of the ISIS position, causing the Army unit to become demoralized and withdraw in a disorganized manner, which ISIS had then sought to exploit.<sup>119</sup>

In contrast to recent Army experience, militia leadership was proactive, with commanders leading from the front and willing to take casualties, and militia at times outperformed the Army and police tactically, as the Army and police were often static, showed limited initiative, and lacked MOUT training.<sup>120</sup> It was militia fighters who often took the initiative, for example,

discovering ISIS tunnels and arms caches in the combat zones, dismantling some 600 IEDs in the town of Al-Muqdadiya, or developing actionable local intelligence.<sup>121</sup> It was *Saraya Al-Salam* fighters who foiled an attack against the port of Basra when they discovered rocket launchers poised to be fired.<sup>122</sup>

Significantly, militia fighters, motivated by religious zeal or a desire for revenge, displayed a willingness to undergo hardships and to stand and fight, as well as a high degree of cohesion, a characteristic reinforced in many instances where recruitment had followed along tribal lines or in a particular locale.<sup>123</sup> The strong backing of the Shia religious establishment, often reinforced by the fact that some of the warlords are themselves clerics, provides an additional source of cohesion, as well as legitimacy. Not only did Al-Sistani's original fatwa provide religious sanction, but senior Shia clerics have continued to go frequently to the front to visit the militias in order to provide spiritual support and assess their logistics needs.<sup>124</sup>

Local loyalties, of course, can also pose difficulties, and, at one point when ISIS seemed dominant and when an immediate threat loomed over the town of Karbala, local officials in the latter pressured recently-volunteered fighters to return home to defend their city.<sup>125</sup> Muthanna province, too, wanted its fighters back, as it felt unprotected.<sup>126</sup> In fact, the local government in Karbala, as was true of other local authorities, requested more resources from the central government to train and equip its local fighters. It also campaigned to transfer authority over to, and channel the requested resources for these local fighters through the provincial government. This is a reflection of the perennial contest for power between the central government and centrifugal forces at the local level.<sup>127</sup>

The additional numbers of militia fighters were also a major help in consolidating victories over ISIS, as that was often a problem for the overextended Army and police. The security forces, in fact, have usually been unable to replace militia forces once ISIS has been defeated, as *Badr's* spokesman pointed out when he offered to turn over Diyala province to the security forces, provided the latter could ensure control.<sup>128</sup> According to a leader in Al-Sadr's movement, despite his militia's offers to relinquish control of retaken areas in order to avoid sectarian problems, the Army and police often decline, arguing that they lack the manpower.<sup>129</sup> In this security vacuum, the militias have provided a stopgap expedient, often having to engage in additional combat in secured areas. For example, the *Khuddam Al-Sayyida Zaynab* (Servants of Our Lady Zaynab), deployed to the supposedly cleared Tikrit area, were forced to launch a spoiling attack against ISIS units preparing to attack militia field headquarters.<sup>130</sup> When operating in Sunni-only areas, however, these militias may be less effective; for example, in Al-Anbar, militia commanders complained that the local population did not cooperate with them or provide intelligence against ISIS.<sup>131</sup>

The militias have also relieved the hard-pressed Army and police by providing general security in the south after the Army had deployed into combat. Militia units that remained in their home areas were especially useful in patrolling familiar terrain continuously, enabling them, for example, to identify and detain would-be ISIS infiltrators, and obviating the need for the commitment of Army forces.<sup>132</sup> Militias also provided security for specific events such as Shia religious festivals, as was the case with the 18,000 militia personnel deployed in Najaf on occasion of the 40th

Day of Husayn's Martyrdom celebration, but they have also undertaken more mundane tasks, such as cleaning Najaf before a religious holiday.<sup>133</sup>

The militias' role in the area of crime, however, has been somewhat problematic. With the departure of Army and police units to the front, in many areas a security vacuum developed that criminal elements exploited, engaging in kidnappings, extortion, and robberies. Often, the perpetrators were gangs claiming to belong to one of the militias. However, Al-Khazali acknowledged that some criminals had also joined the militias for personal gain and as a cover for their illegal activities.<sup>134</sup> In Baghdad in November 2014, the Minister of the Interior appealed to the militias to crack down on such rogue elements, while also including measures to regularize the militias' presence, such as obligating the latter to register their vehicles, leading to many arrests of such rogue elements.<sup>135</sup>

The number of militia casualties is hard to determine since the Iraqi media ordinarily does not disaggregate militia and security forces casualties in reporting. For the campaign in Diyala province through January 2015, however, the militias lost some 500 dead and over 1,000 wounded.<sup>136</sup> While most casualties seem to result from small-scale engagements, occasionally there are also major events in which militia losses have been significant, such as a suicide attack during the Jurf Al-Sakhr campaign that left 25 militia dead in October 2014, while a tanker truck bomb in the Samarra area caused more than 50 casualties in February 2015.<sup>137</sup> Casualties may be underreported in official tallies, as in one engagement in Diyala in January 2015, off-the-record local medical sources reported some 101 militia and 7 Iranian casualties.<sup>138</sup> Given the disproportionate recruitment from the poorer segments of society out of economic need, casual-

ties have also been felt most severely in that sector, at times causing resentment. As one father who had lost a son complained, the sons of the politicians and government officials did not join and fight in the militias.<sup>139</sup> Aware of the sensitivity and in order to lessen the impact of casualties, in some cases, the authorities scheduled individual burials at different times of the day and in different places.<sup>140</sup>

## **THE MILITIAS' STRATEGIC AND POLITICAL IMPACT**

The militias and the warlords have also had a significant impact at the political level. Despite their stabilizing role from one perspective in helping to turn the tide against ISIS, the militia warlords at the same time have also weighed in on, have influenced, or have triggered a number of political-military issues, some of which threaten to spark domestic conflict and could have a serious effect on Iraq's long-term security and stability. More precisely, the warlords' input extends to concrete policies, which they may introduce, derail, shape, or delay, depending on the specific circumstances. Many of these issues affect policies—most often in negative terms—in which the United States has a direct interest. While the warlords have an influence on most policies, several stand out as especially significant.

### **Targeting Urban Areas.**

In the fight against ISIS, the Sunnis have complained of indiscriminate government air strikes and shelling against urban areas which, although aimed at ISIS, have also caused civilian casualties, and which



the Sunnis have often seen as an intentional way to punish all Sunnis. While the government under Prime Minister Al-Ibadi in 2014 committed itself to end strikes against urban areas, in practice this has been difficult to achieve, not least because of pressure on the government by the militias. The latter and their constituents have argued that restraint in bombing and shelling would only help ISIS. For example, a *Badr* Member of Parliament (who is also a militia field commander) complained that the government's moratorium on such operations was hampering the defeat of ISIS.<sup>141</sup> There is widespread support within the broader Shia community for the militias' stand and, typically, a leading cleric in Basra demanded the government resume air strikes against cities as part of the fight against ISIS.<sup>142</sup> Sunni organizations in Iraq—some of which have cooperated with ISIS—on the other hand have pressured the United States not to target urban areas.<sup>143</sup> In practice, such operations have continued, generating continued Sunni discontent.

### **Creating a National Guard.**

The United States has promoted the creation of a National Guard, with medium and heavy weapons and maneuver units focused on the Sunni areas as a mechanism to provide security and as reassurance to the country's Sunni community. Sunni leaders have supported the concept of a National Guard strongly, viewing it as a Sunni Army and as a basic guarantee for their community.

However, the project was slow in getting off the ground, not least because of obstruction by the warlords, who no doubt saw this force as a competitor and as a threat to the authority of the central govern-

ment in which they had a stake, not to speak of the sectarian aspect. The process was not made easier by the fact that, for many Sunnis—including Sunni Members of Parliament—the mission of the planned National Guard was to be not only against ISIS but also “to get rid of the [Shia] militias” from the Sunni provinces.<sup>144</sup> Shia warlords raised a number of objections intended to delay, if not derail, the establishment of the National Guard. Al-Amiri, for example, expressed his reservations about forming the National Guard, calling the plan “hasty.”<sup>145</sup> *Hizb Allah* claimed the National Guard would partition the country.<sup>146</sup> One *Badr* Member of Parliament, for his part, opposed the National Guard’s having heavy weapons, at least in the immediate future.<sup>147</sup> In their opposition, the militias were able to rely on a broad-based Shia hostility to such a force. Even the senior Shia clerics expressed their reluctance for a basically Sunni National Guard, arguing that it was better not to rely on sectarian and ethnic structures although, given the same clerics’ involvement with the Shia militias, that stance may appear hypocritical.<sup>148</sup>

More broadly, the warlords and their spokesmen often demanded that volunteers from all communities be allowed to join, thereby likely ensuring a Shia majority, with Al-Sadr insisting specifically that militia units also be incorporated into any such new force.<sup>149</sup> Some warlords and Shia politicians stated they would accept the National Guard, provided it was organized on a nationwide basis and with its own government ministry, whereby they presumably could exercise their own influence in the new force and compete with the military.<sup>150</sup> One Member of Parliament even proposed that the Shia militias should be the nucleus for any National Guard.<sup>151</sup> Sensitive to

this entrenched opposition, the Prime Minister's office felt it prudent to coordinate the establishment of the National Guard with the militias and even to suggest that the latter could constitute "the nucleus" for the National Guard.<sup>152</sup>

### **Rehabilitating the Baathists.**

Closely related to the National Guard issue was whether to rescind the punitive laws against Baathists and Saddam-era officers and to reintegrate them into society, as the Sunnis have requested. Specifically, the Sunnis assumed that the leadership for the National Guard was to be provided by recruiting former officers in Saddam's Army (who would ordinarily have joined the Baath Party and had had Sunni tribal links), and the local media reported that a visiting U.S. delegation had actually met with veteran officers for that purpose.<sup>153</sup> On the contrary, according to a *Badr* leader, the new *Badr* Minister of the Interior was intent on purging "all Baathist officers and anyone with Baathist sympathies."<sup>154</sup> *Jaysh Al-Mukhtar* even vowed to exterminate the Baathists if the latter were rehabilitated.<sup>155</sup> In any event, the Shia refused to disband the Accountability and Justice Committee, which investigated Baathists, as the Sunnis had hoped, as part of a deal to establish the National Guard.

### **Détente with the Gulf States.**

As Prime Minister, Al-Ibadi has pursued a policy of détente with Iraq's neighbors and, in particular, with the Gulf States, but the militia warlords have often complicated the effort, displaying particular hostility toward Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab

Emirates (UAE). There had already been a stormy history between some of the militias and these states, which was often fueled by religious friction. For example, Abu Al-Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the number-two man in *Badr* and in the *Hay'at Al-Hashd Al-Shabi*, had been sentenced to death in absentia by Kuwait in connection with an alleged attempt on the latter country's ruler in 1983. Likewise, in 2013, the *Ahl Al-Haqq* had shelled a Saudi border post in protest to what it claimed was Saudi interference in Iraq.

More recently, such irritants as the arrest and trial of prominent Shia clerics in Saudi Arabia and Bahrein, accusations of the Gulf States' funding and arming ISIS and the Sunni community, and the UAE's call in November 2014 to place a number of the Iraqi militias on the international terrorist list have raised the militias' ire, as has the Saudi media's promotion of the outsider warlord, Al-Sarkhi. Militia warlords have also viewed Saudi Arabia's willingness to support lower oil prices and its decision to maintain production levels as targeting Iraqi interests. Al-Amiri has portrayed the Gulf States as ingrates, arguing that it was Iraq's militias and Al-Sistani's fatwa that had saved them from ISIS.<sup>156</sup> To a certain extent, Prime Minister Al-Ibadi has had to accommodate such views, as he explained his opposition to Arab air strikes in Iraq as part of the Coalition in terms of suspecting that Saudi Arabia would also target the militias.<sup>157</sup> Indicative of the implied disruptive power that the militias can wield, the Iraqi media reported that Prime Minister Al-Ibadi had made sure to check with the political parties that have militias (as well as with Iran) to obtain their assurance that they would not oppose the reopening of the Saudi embassy in Baghdad.<sup>158</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

### Sharing a Battlefield.

Unavoidably, the presence and activity of the Shia militias also have an impact on U.S. interests and policy at both the strategic and operational levels. Clearly, many of the issues noted previously intersect with U.S. policy considerations, some more directly than others. Some of the militias have a history of violent confrontation with U.S. forces dating back to the post-Saddam period. More recently, most militias have displayed a more muted but still hostile attitude toward the United States, although such hostility has been modulated for those militias loyal to Iran, as the latter has engaged in its own rapprochement with Washington, the centerpiece of which has been the negotiating process surrounding Iran's nuclear program.

Even so, there is skepticism and hostility in militia circles toward the United States which cannot be discounted. In January 2015, Al-Sadr's party even tried to have Parliament abrogate the existing U.S.-Iraqi Security Agreement.<sup>159</sup> Should bilateral U.S.-Iranian relations deteriorate, that could mean a sharpening of militia hostility in Iraq as well. As it is, for example, Iraqi *Hizb Allah* has stated that it would deal with foreign troops as with occupiers, which Iran – perhaps as a subtle warning of its own – was eager to report in its own media, adding that one of the options the United States was considering was using “the pretext of fighting ISIS” to introduce ground troops.<sup>160</sup>

Shia warlords express negative views of U.S. policy either directly or through the political parties they lead or the media they control. Since many of the militias have their own websites, newspapers, radio and

TV stations, and well-developed social media skills, they can get their message out effectively. The Shia warlords, and Shia opinion in general, see any U.S. policy against a backdrop of a greater alleged strategy of Washington's expansion in the region. *Badr*, for example, has claimed that U.S. policy in Iraq was part of "a secret plan to remake the Middle East."<sup>161</sup> A common theme is that the U.S. fight against ISIS is not genuine and merely a pretext to re-occupy Iraq; that its intent is to weaken Iraq in order to increase Israel's security; that the United States created ISIS; and, as a Sadrist Member of Parliament claimed, that the U.S. intent was to break up Iraq.<sup>162</sup> The official *Badr* newspaper, in fact, accused the United States of wanting to reestablish its influence in the Middle East through the fight against ISIS, characterizing the policy as "soft colonialist power."<sup>163</sup>

There is already a general resentment in militia circles of the U.S. personnel, stemming from an unease with the growing number of U.S. advisers, as was the case after an increase in November 2014, when a Sadrist Member of Parliament, while praising the militias, warned of "interference in Iraq's affairs" and of a stealth return of American influence, while *Ahl Al-Haqq* complained that Parliament should have discussed the issue before increasing the number of trainers.<sup>164</sup> In that overall political atmosphere, even the appearance of cooperating with the Americans is to be avoided, as, for example, militiamen left Al-Asad base in Al-Anbar after U.S. trainers arrived in November 2014.<sup>165</sup> Such concern over even implying cooperation with Americans is legitimated by support within Shia clerical circles at the highest levels, as Ayatollah Al-Sistani has warned Iraqi leaders that foreign help should not be "an entrée to trample the independence

of political and military decisionmaking” for Iraq, while Al-Sistani’s representative warned the Coalition not to prepare for “a permanent war” in Iraq and stressed the need to respect Iraq’s sovereignty and independence.<sup>166</sup>

Although most militias grudgingly accept Iraq’s current need for U.S. air and training support, some warlords, such as Hadi Al-Amiri, have dismissed altogether – at least for show – the need for Coalition support, especially once the situation had stabilized, arguing that the Army and militias could liberate Iraq.<sup>167</sup> Moreover, the militias’ media frequently provides a message to the effect that the Coalition has not been doing enough, and is not effective, against ISIS. Militias have spread rumors that the United States did not really want to target ISIS effectively since, as one *Badr* Member of Parliament put it, the U.S. intent was only to use ISIS’s presence to divide Iraq and get at its oil resources.<sup>168</sup> As a corollary, a consensus among the warlords developed – and a position echoed by Iran – that the Coalition was not committed and that it would fail in uprooting ISIS terrorism, with Al-Amiri calling reliance on the Coalition “a mirage.”<sup>169</sup> At the same time, the militias have also criticized repeatedly what they saw as U.S. delays in fulfilling stalled arms agreements and interpreted that as part of a hostile policy designed to help ISIS.<sup>170</sup> To a great extent, such militia views are often reinforced by other prominent figures in the Shia community. Al-Sistani’s representative, for example, has also claimed that the West wants to divide Iraq.<sup>171</sup> Militia priorities may differ from those of the United States in terms of phasing the liberation of territory, with the militias in early-2015 favoring Salah Al-Din province first as opposed to U.S. preferences for a Mosul-first effort.<sup>172</sup>

The U.S. military has already been operating in the same battlespace as the militias, whether with air operations, training missions, or even providing unwilling support, as in arming the militias, even if only indirectly. For example, according to unnamed U.S. senior officials, arms that the United States had supplied to the Iraqi government for use by the country's military have been transferred to the militias.<sup>173</sup> In a sense, the U. S. military has already de facto collaborated in "combined" operations with some militias, which operate alongside regular Iraqi Army units, by providing air support to some campaigns. Conversely, the militias have had to acknowledge the reality of a U.S. presence in the fight against ISIS, if only because of the need to avoid being struck in error from the air which, given the fluid situation on the ground and often poor air-ground deconfliction, takes on added importance. Recognizing this factor, militia operations at times, as in the fight for the town of Bayji, have had to proceed more slowly out of concern for possible misplaced air strikes.<sup>174</sup>

The militias have used U.S. operations to fuel resentment with claims intended to reflect America's alleged hostile intentions. For example, militias have claimed that U.S. air strikes had struck their forces deliberately, as was the case with both Muqtada Al-Sadr and *Hizb Allah*.<sup>175</sup> Even more intense was the recurring propaganda campaign, echoed by Iran, that the United States was air-dropping arms and supplies to ISIS. Al-Hakim's political spokesmen, for example, explained that the reason for such alleged U.S. help to ISIS was that Washington wanted to prolong the war and thereby attrit Iraq's manpower.<sup>176</sup> While errant air-drops may well have landed in ISIS-controlled



areas on the fluid battlefield, the militias portrayed this as a willful policy intended to help ISIS in support of U.S. interests.

The close proximity of militia and U.S. forces, combined with militia hostility, carries the risk of potential confrontations. In February 2015, *Hizb Allah* claimed to have fired on a U.S. helicopter on the ground, which it asserted had airlifted ISIS fighters, prompting Parliament's Security and Defense Committee to authorize shooting down any aircraft on such a mission.<sup>177</sup>

The militia factor will be even more relevant for any ground presence of U.S. Army personnel – including those engaged in a training mission – as well as for other U.S. and allied military and civilian government personnel, or contractors.<sup>178</sup> Moreover, the media has reported on some U.S., British, and Canadian Special Forces engaged in combat, which could heighten the potential for contact and friction.<sup>179</sup>

In practical terms, the militias – in particular those that have close ties to Iran and the Lebanese *Hizb Allah* – will likely collect intelligence on U.S. systems, organization, and techniques; engage in hostile propaganda; and may constitute an operational security and force protection risk, due to their long history of hostility toward the United States and clashing interests with the latter; any information they collect likely would be passed on to the Iranians. Such militia attitudes place limits on U.S. policy options and at some point could also engender friction on the ground, leading to anti-American violence by members of some militias even if no U.S. ground combat elements are introduced, given the multiplicity of militias and the challenges of command and control.

## Pre-empting the Option of Coalition Ground Forces.

Although the deployment of ground combat forces into Iraq has perhaps not been a serious policy consideration from the American side, this has been a major issue for Iraqis, who have seen the possibility as either something to be encouraged or to be opposed, usually depending on their communal identity and interests. As one might expect, Sunni leaders, as was the case with Sahwa leader, Ahmad Abu Risha, have been vocal proponents of a U.S. ground intervention against ISIS, in great part to forestall a presence of the Shia militias and the Iraqi Army (which they view as largely Shia) in their areas.<sup>180</sup> A Member of Parliament representing Al-Anbar, from the Sunni *Ittihad Al-Quwa Al-Wataniya* party, in fact, argued openly that the Coalition represents Sunni interests and expressed his strong support for a foreign ground presence.<sup>181</sup> Some Al-Anbar officials even threatened to stop fighting against ISIS unless the Iraqi government made a commitment to approve a U.S. ground presence.<sup>182</sup>

Conversely, all the Shia warlords have adamantly rejected any such ground combat presence, based both on ideological and power interest motives. For example, Al-Hakim opposed either regional or Coalition ground forces in Iraq and when he met General (Ret.) John Allen, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition against ISIS, in October 2014, he reportedly told the latter outright that the Iraqis opposed ground forces and just wanted U.S. weapons.<sup>183</sup> Sadr Al-Din Al-Qubanchi, the main imam in Najaf and a leading figure in the Supreme Islamic Council, not only opposed a Coalition ground presence but even urged that the Coalition provide weapons and money

for the militias instead.<sup>184</sup> Iraqi *Hizb Allah*, for its part, warned that U.S. ground forces would be a step in the United States' "plan to re-occupy Iraq" and concluded that "we will not permit America's return in any form," expressing its displeasure already by what it claimed were U.S. officers directing operations.<sup>185</sup> *Ahl Al-Haqq's* leader, Qays Al-Khazali, likewise, opposed U.S. ground forces, stating that "we will not accept any foreign troops in Iraq," and preferred that Washington just arm Iraq, while voicing his suspicion that Washington would introduce ground forces in order to partition the country as a way to enhance Israel's security.<sup>186</sup>

Several of the militias have hinted what their reaction would be if there were a foreign ground intervention, perhaps seeking to forestall such an option. For example, *Badr's* leader Al-Amiri warned that his militia's personnel would "refuse outright to fight under an American umbrella."<sup>187</sup> Highlighting the difficulty often in distinguishing intersecting roles of militia figures, the Minister of Municipalities, who is also the Assistant Secretary General of the Badr Party, likewise spoke with his party/militia hat on in opposing the presence of foreign ground troops.<sup>188</sup> For their part, *Hizb Allah* and the *Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada'* also stated their refusal to cooperate with the United States and threatened to leave their positions if U.S. ground forces were deployed.<sup>189</sup> In late October 2014, in fact, Al-Sadr ordered the *Saraya Al-Salam* to begin a phased withdrawal from areas in which they had been operating, ostensibly irked that some in the government had urged a U.S. ground presence.<sup>190</sup>

Some militias even threatened to oppose any U.S. ground combat forces actively and, for example, *Ahl Al-Haqq* warned that it would fight against any such

presence.<sup>191</sup> Al-Sadr, too, threatened that if the United States deployed ground forces, his militia not only would withdraw from the front immediately but, he added, “If you return, we will return . . . we will make you taste the woes of your decision, which you will regret.”<sup>192</sup> A Member of Parliament from Al-Sadr’s party added that “If they [i.e., the Americans] are thinking of returning, that will mean digging their own graves.”<sup>193</sup> There were reports that Iran in September 2014 had sent guidance to those militias loyal to Tehran to pressure Prime Minister Al-Ibadi not to allow U.S. ground combat forces, threatening to stop their own operations otherwise.<sup>194</sup>

Such skepticism of and opposition to a U.S. ground presence is shared and supported by broad segments of Shia public opinion in the country. Recognizing that a large and visible U.S. ground presence would be unpopular within the Shia community in general, Prime Minister Al-Ibadi and other senior officials have gone out of their way to reassure their power base that they, too, are opposed to that. Reflecting both the direct impact of warlords within the government and the perceived need even within pro-Western circles to accommodate such domestic fears, Al-Ibadi came out repeatedly against any foreign ground troop presence in Al-Anbar, stressing the need for only international air support, armaments, and efforts to cut off funding to ISIS.<sup>195</sup> In a meeting with Al-Sistani in October 2014, Prime Minister Al-Ibadi reportedly was careful to reassure the latter that no U.S. ground troops would come.<sup>196</sup>

## THE MILITIAS, SECTARIANISM, AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

Ultimately, national reconciliation among Iraq's sectarian and ethnic components will be essential to bring about genuine stability and security. However, communal relations in the country remain tense, in no small part because of the militias' activity, although the Sunni and the Kurdish communities also bear a share of responsibility for the situation.

### **The Militias and the Sunnis.**

The increased prominence of the Shia militias has exacerbated in many ways the Sunni community's long-standing grievances and fears of a hostile or indifferent Shia-dominated government and represents a major obstacle in achieving national reconciliation. Both Ayatollah Al-Sistani and several of the top warlords have stressed publicly that they fight for Iraq as a whole and that they oppose sectarianism (*al-ta'ifiya*). Al-Sadr at one point even ordered the *Saraya Al-Salam* to replace the Al-Sadr insignias on their uniforms with the map of Iraq in order not to give the impression that this was a sectarian war.<sup>197</sup> However, Al-Sadr has also equated the enemy in sectarian terms as "the killers of Husayn," a damning image as persecutors of one of the holiest figures in Shia doctrine.<sup>198</sup> The religious coloring of the Shia militias is inescapable. Not only are they in many cases created and led by Shia clerics, but the names of the militia units, the mottos they use, the banners they fly in addition to the Iraqi flag, and the posters they display are clearly from the Shia tradition. Typically, the *Firqat Al-Abbas Al-Qitaliya's* inaugural parade in Karbala had culminated at the

central Husayn shrine.<sup>199</sup> In October 2014, militiamen renewed their oath in Shia shrines. Shia clerics serve as chaplains with the deployed militia units or go to the field to raise morale, preach on religion, and explain geo-political issues, focusing especially on “why we fight.”<sup>200</sup> Even Prime Minister Al-Ibadi, while condemning sectarianism, has sometimes also played to Shia sentiments to encourage cohesion, calling the population to follow the “lesson from Imam Husayn’s path in order to defeat the Umma’s enemies.”<sup>201</sup>

Many in the Sunni community see the Shia militia as a threat, and the militias’ actions continue to fuel deeply felt grievances that will delay or even prevent the detachment of the Sunni community from ISIS, as well as provide tinder for future conflict. Militia operations in Sunni areas have long been controversial, especially in Al-Anbar province, the hotbed of Sunni protest against the former Al-Maliki government and a source of local support for ISIS. Typically, when *Ahl Al-Haqq* deployed a unit of 300 to Al-Anbar in November 2014, the local tribes complained that they did not want the militias but arms, equipment, and logistic support instead.<sup>202</sup>

Reflecting a widespread Sunni perception, a Member of Parliament stressed that military operations often have an anti-Sunni character irrespective of the Sunnis’ ideology.<sup>203</sup> Many Sunnis, in fact, argue that the Baghdad government and the Shia militias lump all Sunnis together as terrorists, and that all Sunnis are victims of a systematic policy of revenge.<sup>204</sup> A cleric in Fallujah even accused the Baghdad government of conducting operations intended to “exterminate the Sunnis.”<sup>205</sup>

Iraq’s Sunni media and religious circles specifically address the issue of militia crimes constantly (al-

ways using the term, *milishiya*, in its pejorative Iraqi sense), and this issue has been a major source of Sunni alienation. Sunni politicians have been outspoken in their recriminations against the warlords, with one Sunni Member of Parliament, for example, calling the leader of the *Ahl Al-Haqq* a “Shia criminal,” and using the pejorative term “Safavid” for Shia.<sup>206</sup> In Al-Anbar, Sunni politicians accused militias such as the *Saraya Al-Salam* of committing atrocities under the pretext of liberating the province and argued that it was better to arm the local Sunnis instead.<sup>207</sup>

Sunnis accuse the Shia militias of committing crimes against the Sunni population in a systematic manner – whether from political motivation, religious animosity, personal gain, or revenge – including killing civilians, kidnapping, torching houses, extorting businesses, looting, destroying palm groves, and ethnic cleansing; international observers have confirmed many of these accusations.<sup>208</sup> Militias – and the Army – are sometimes accused of conducting scorched-earth operations and, in Diyala province, militias were said to engage in collective punishment, retaliating for IEDs planted by ISIS by shooting local Sunni residents.<sup>209</sup> Ethnic cleansing at times appears to be methodical and part of policy, as local Sunni critics have charged that the militias were preventing Sunni refugees from returning to Diyala province in areas along the border with Iran, evidently a point of concern for the latter as well as for those Iraqis intent on securing land access to Iran.<sup>210</sup>

In fact, a Sunni coalition mounted a campaign, which included sending a petition to the White House, asking that the Shia militias be included on the international list of terrorist organizations, although the Iraqi government blocked a local satellite channel

promoting the petition.<sup>211</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Saalih Al-Mutlag, a Sunni, for his part, wanted the Coalition to target the Shia militias as well as ISIS with its air strikes.<sup>212</sup> In Diyala province, Sunnis formed their own units specifically to defend against “the terrorist militias” and asked for government support.<sup>213</sup> Frustrated tribes and Members of Parliament from Al-Anbar complained that the government, for political reasons, was willing to arm the Shia militias, but not the Sunni tribes. Militia sources countered that seeking arms for the tribes was just a vehicle for arming the jihadis, accusing some tribes of selling weapons to ISIS.<sup>214</sup>

On occasion, Army officers have confronted ill-disciplined militiamen and exchanged fire over the latter’s actions, such as torching Sunni homes.<sup>215</sup> However, overall, Sunni sources argue that government forces do nothing to restrain the militias. Sunnis also complain that the legal route does not provide redress, as they say that courts support the militias.<sup>216</sup> In addition, Iraq’s Sunnis—even those hostile to ISIS—have been exasperated that the Coalition, in their view, was ignoring their treatment at the hands of the Shia militias.<sup>217</sup> Such perceptions may well affect the Sunnis’ relationship with the government, and some may even see ISIS as providing a shield against the Shia. As one Sunni Member of Parliament noted, “They [i.e., the Shia militias] arrest people, and nobody knows where they are taken. . . . This makes so many people want to volunteer with [the] Islamic State to fight the militias.”<sup>218</sup> In support of that conclusion, Sunnis in the area south of Baghdad were said to often favor ISIS specifically as protection against the Shia militias.<sup>219</sup> As a result of the military operations and, no doubt of militia policies, there was an increase in Sunni refu-



gees who, according to the Chief of Police of Diyala, had become a willing pool of recruits for ISIS, with only women, children, and the old remaining in some refugee camps.<sup>220</sup>

Militias have routinely denied any wrongdoing against the Sunnis or have contended any such occurrences were only isolated cases. Often, their supporters in the government have backed them up. Thus, Iraq's Ministry for Human Rights (headed by a member of the Badr Party, Muhammad Al-Bayati) rejected outright the accusations by Amnesty International of sectarian massacres, arguing that the militias are part of the Iraqi military and that the allegations could not be proven.<sup>221</sup> Only occasionally have militia warlords acknowledged, even if only in general terms, violations of human rights, and some warlords at least have verbally condemned such conduct. For example, Al-Sadr disavowed those members of his own militia who had been involved in executing prisoners and nearby Sunni villagers after the relief of Amirli, condemning retaliation and calling for "an end of hate."<sup>222</sup> Al-Hakim also met with his militiamen and stressed the need to follow orders and to maintain discipline.<sup>223</sup> The top Shia religious authority, Al-Sistani, also acknowledged a problem. Aware of violations in the field, he censured the "few undisciplined elements who, by their actions, give a bad name to the volunteers," and reminded fighters that it was forbidden to attack any innocent civilians but, at the same time, cautioned politicians not to generalize the behavior of what he said was a minority of wrongdoers to the majority of militia fighters, and cautioned that it was necessary to continue supporting the fighters to achieve victory.<sup>224</sup> Again, in late January 2015 as Diyala was being cleared, both Al-Sistani and Al-Amiri reiterated

the need to protect private property, although Al-Amiri also equated critics to ISIS fellow travelers.

However, whether such verbal reproaches will translate into effective measures on the ground is questionable, as command and control at the local level may be weak and discipline hard to enforce, especially given the emotions that may play a role. Significantly, as Diyala was being cleared, even Sunni tribes allied to the government against ISIS complained of attacks by the Army and militias against homes, mosques, and individuals.<sup>225</sup> The fact that in January 2015 Al-Amiri became head of the committee charged with the return of refugees to Diyala or that a hardline Sadrist Member of Parliament, Hakim Al-Zamili, is head of a committee tasked with investigating a massacre of Sunni civilians, may not help matters. What is more, senior government officials, including the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Defense, have often either cast doubt on or dismissed outright accusations of wrongdoing by the militias. Even Prime Minister Al-Ibadi, perhaps motivated by expediency and a sense of a continuing need for the militias, refused to accuse the latter of war crimes, claiming that the alleged crimes had not been committed by either the Army or the militias; or he attributed such accusations to “politics” and equated their critics to a fifth column.<sup>226</sup>

Barring effective measures by the Baghdad government to address the issue of the militias’ mistreatment of Sunni civilians, the Sunnis’ negative perceptions are likely to fester and to hamper operations against ISIS. To be sure, the Sunni community itself is fragmented, and some tribes have become disillusioned by the lack of government support in their fight against ISIS. They resent what they claim is the government’s reluctance to arm and pay them while supporting the

militias lavishly. For example, the Al Bu Nimr tribe, which had been battered by ISIS and feeling that the government had abandoned it, felt it had no choice but to arrive at an understanding with Al-Sadr, who promised to provide arms and training and, eventually, sent 2,000 personnel from the *Saraya Al-Salam* to Al-Anbar in November 2014. However, most Sunni tribes in Al-Anbar have developed a deep distrust of the Shia militias and, according to one Sunni leader, “there is fear of the militias’ arrival . . . and of a repetition of what occurred in Diyala, Jurf Al-Sakhr, and Al-Wafa’ south of Al-Ramadi, when the militias torched civilians’ houses, looted their property, and killed them by the dozen after liberating the areas,” while a tribal chief asked “Why do we need the militias? We are beginning to have doubts about the militias’ entering Al-Ramadi.”<sup>227</sup>

In this charged atmosphere, any incident can escalate quickly, as was the case when the militias allegedly interrogated and then executed two residents of Al-Ramadi in February 2015. The killings sparked rage within Al-Anbar, prompting tribal chiefs to demand the militias leave the province, and obliging Prime Minister Al-Ibadi to intervene personally to investigate the matter.<sup>228</sup> However, members of both communities have been guilty of sectarian massacres, which provide ongoing flashpoints and make it difficult to quell passions. Significantly, the *Ahl Al-Haqq* code-named its campaign in Salah Al-Din province “Revenge for the Speicher Martyrs,” referring to the Shia cadets massacred by ISIS, allegedly aided by local Sunni tribes.<sup>229</sup>

## The Militias and the Kurds.

Although muted at present, there is also the potential for friction between the Shia militias and the Kurdish community, centering on control of territory, oil revenues, and the concept of decentralization or central control. To be sure, the Kurdish Peshmerga and the militias (as well as the Army) have cooperated in military operations against ISIS as the common enemy. Despite the current cooperation, there have also been indications that this relationship could fray in the future as control over liberated areas that are mixed comes into question.

Many Iraqis (Shia and Sunni) resent what they see as the Kurds having taken advantage of the weakness of the Iraqi government and military to seize the contested oil-rich Kirkuk area and other parts of Diyala. They fear further Kurdish expansion as additional ISIS-held territory is liberated, especially in light of the Kurdistan Regional Government's open statement after the liberation of the Sanjar area in December 2014 that it would annex the latter to Kurdistan. *Badr* was critical of the landmark agreement Baghdad had worked out with Kurdistan on revenue sharing.

A Kurdish Member of Parliament accused the central government of conducting a sectarian policy by stationing the militias in the liberated areas in Diyala province and using them to carry out an Arabization policy to the detriment of Kurdish interests.<sup>230</sup> The Kurds, for their part, have also been accused of carrying out ethnic cleansing and refused to allow militia units to be raised in the disputed Kirkuk and Mosul areas. This is critical in that the Baghdad government had proposed \$3 billion to buy arms for the militias to garrison those two areas.<sup>231</sup> In fact, the Peshmerga

have repeatedly demanded — unsuccessfully — that the militias relinquish to them control of the areas that the latter liberated in that province.<sup>232</sup> Al-Hakim, among others, has gone out of his way to remind the Kurds that Kurdistan is still part of Iraq, while *Badr* has accused the Kurds of exploiting the militias' victories for their own benefit.<sup>233</sup> Shortly after the siege of Amirli was lifted in a joint effort, the Badr Force seized several key checkpoints and offices in the town from the Kurdish Peshmerga, while in January 2015, the Kurds detained a dozen militiamen following a dispute and ensuing firefight.<sup>234</sup> In February 2015, Kurdish officials warned that any attempt by the militias to enter Kirkuk — a continuing ethnic flashpoint — would be met by force.<sup>235</sup> On one occasion, General Sulaymani, highlighting the influence he has with the militias, reportedly hurried to the scene in the mixed Diyala province in order to defuse friction between the militias and the Peshmerga over accusations by the latter that the militias were ethnically cleansing local Kurds.<sup>236</sup> Such friction adds a complication to the campaign to retake Mosul and could involve the militias in further confrontations.

## **LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE: REALITIES AND IMPLICATIONS**

The warlords no doubt keep an eye down the road, on the post-ISIS period as well as on the present, and are laying the foundations for a reshaped national power balance in which they and their parties would gain greater influence. A number of factors are likely to affect the developing situation and could have significant implications for Iraq's future and for U.S. interests.

## A Continuing Need for the Militias.

Barring a significant foreign ground combat presence, Iraqis will perceive a continuing need for the militias in the effort against ISIS for some time to come. Rebuilding the Iraqi Army – which had been hobbled by corruption, poor leadership, absentee soldiers, insufficient training, ineffective logistics, and shaky morale during the Al-Maliki era – into an effective force will not happen quickly. Both Lieutenant General James Terry, the commander leading the U.S. military mission in Iraq, and Prime Minister Al-Ibadi acknowledged in January 2015 that this process could take 3 years.<sup>237</sup> The militias complain of problems in joint operations with the Army, due to ineffective Army officers, and report that some Army officers ran away or withdrew their units, leaving the militia volunteers behind, and that government air support often arrived late.<sup>238</sup> According to an Iraqi military analyst, even into 2015, the Army still was poor at coordinating among its own units, lacked a national operations center, only maneuvered in large units, lacked sufficient MOUT skills, and was slow and visible, leaving it vulnerable to the more agile ISIS's small unit tactics.<sup>239</sup> Even Prime Minister Al-Ibadi told militia commanders in February 2015 that their militias were “the key pillar of our system,” since the Army “is not structured for anti-guerrilla operations.”<sup>240</sup>

The Iraqi Army has also lacked a sufficient manpower base to meet its multiple demands. This shortcoming is linked to the problem of Iraq's “ghost” soldiers (*fada'iyun*, literally “empty-space men,” or *wahmiyun*, literally “imaginary men”)—personnel existing only on paper, with officials and officers syphoning off the imaginary soldiers' salaries, allowing

troops to go home for a share of their pay, or having them work in the officers' private companies. According to one Iraqi source, as of November 2014, there were said to be more than 200,000 such ghost soldiers in the military, although others placed the number at 50,000.<sup>241</sup> Despite Al-Ibadi's vigorous efforts to end this practice, reform will take time, as the problem was entrenched at the highest levels of the political and military systems and is endemic in the police, most government ministries, and economic and social institutions—including 60,000 ghost security guards for the Members of Parliament—so that many entrenched interests who stand to lose will likely drag their feet on reform.<sup>242</sup> Even in January 2015, according to a Member of Parliament from Al-Anbar, only 25 percent of the Army personnel on the roster for duty in the province were actually available for combat.<sup>243</sup>

Moreover, Kurdish forces also may only provide limited support as further campaigns unfold against ISIS, depending on Kurdish interests. As Nechirvan Barzani—the provincial Prime-Minister of Kurdistan—stressed in January 2015, the Kurds would fight for “areas that rightfully belonged to the Kurdish region and would avoid using peshmerga fighters to drive Islamic State fighters from Sunni areas or retake Mosul.”<sup>244</sup>

### **Thinking and Debating Reorganization.**

Given the likelihood of the militias' continued significance, it is not surprising that there has been a trend to institutionalize the *Hay'at Al-Hashd Al-Shabi* (Popular Hashd Agency) administration as a new center of power. By December 2014, responsibility for the Hay'a had been transferred from the Ministry of the

Interior to the Cabinet, suggesting an intent to centralize and establish a more permanent stand-alone structure. Indications in early-2015 pointed to the development of a more professional organization for the Hay'a with its own administrative directorates, intelligence, security, and coordination capabilities.<sup>245</sup>

The country has seen the establishment in many ways of a parallel army and, perhaps, the militia force may develop into an equivalent of the IRGC or the Basij in Iran, with additional equipment and professionalization, in tandem with the regular army. Some in the Hay'a administration have proposed an expansion of the existing Hay'a by creating new units and staffing them with the current militia fighters as individuals without their present militia units' names and flags and placing the expanded force directly under the Hay'a's command, essentially creating a parallel force similar to the IRGC.<sup>246</sup> It is unclear how the individual militia warlords might react to such proposals. At the time, only Al-Sadr, often a maverick, appeared to agree to an end of the militias by full integration into the Army.<sup>247</sup>

However, the coalition nature of individual competitive militias and warlords jealous of their autonomy may well preclude such an amalgamation. For example, while the militias graduated a better-trained Special Forces unit by January 2015, indicating a trend toward professionalization, even the new contingent was then incorporated into the Badr Force.<sup>248</sup> In practice, each militia operates according to its own interests. Al-Amiri was fully aware that the militias are far from united and rued that they thus did not achieve their full operational potential because of their autonomy.<sup>249</sup> For now at least, the government, Army, and police have only tenuous operational control over the



militias. For example, municipal authorities can appeal directly to militia leaders and bypass the government chain of command, as was the case for the embattled town of Duluiya, which asked for Al-Amiri's help in repulsing ISIS attacks.<sup>250</sup>

Although the National Guard project eventually passed by a narrow margin within the Cabinet in February 2015, it looked as if it would face further hurdles before the full Parliament because of unresolved issues, including its relationship to the militias. Iran was said to be promoting the transformation of the militias into the National Guard and, in fact, the spokesman of the Hay'a proposed changing the latter's name to the National Guard, in essence making the militias the core of the new organization, which would defeat the original intent of the National Guard and alienate the Sunnis.<sup>251</sup> As it was, in order to make the National Guard acceptable to the Shia, the punitive laws against the Baathists remained in force, complicating efforts to recruit Saddam-era officers.

### **Translating Prestige into Power.**

Success on the battlefield against ISIS has provided the militias with popularity, as well as military muscle, that can be translated into political power. The warlords' present-day operations and political activity are intertwined, and the warlords will work to shape the situation so that they can institutionalize a greater role for themselves in the future. Nuri Al-Maliki, still a political player even after his ouster as Prime Minister, for example, was critical of *Badr*, accusing the latter of using military operations for "electoral propaganda" and to increase its leader's popularity for the next election cycle.<sup>252</sup> If the warlords' prestige grows, they could establish a greater presence within the govern-

ment, which would also provide greater entrée into Iraq by Tehran, with which several warlords have close ties.

Even if it remains only an administrative umbrella organization, the Hay'a is a lucrative prize because of the cash that flows through it and the political clout that this financial lever could represent over individual militias. Thus, not surprisingly, various players have sought to gain control over it. The Minister of the Interior (a leading *Badr* figure), for example, preferred to absorb the militias directly into his own ministry.<sup>253</sup> Al-Sistani allegedly had released an edict supporting placing the militias under the Ministry of Defense, although his office maintained that there had been no such edict and that this document was a forgery.<sup>254</sup>

In early-2015, Nuri Al-Maliki launched a concerted behind-the-scenes lobbying and public relations effort to garner the allegiance of some warlords in his bid to become the head of the Hay'a, whose current director and its spokesman are from Al-Maliki's political grouping. Hyping his own role in the original mass mobilization at the expense of Al-Sistani and forcefully defending the militias against domestic critics, Al-Maliki also highlighted the key role he had played as Prime Minister in supporting the Assad regime, no doubt seeking to garner Iran's backing for his candidacy.<sup>255</sup> Al-Maliki, still a political player and an inveterate schemer despite his ouster as Prime Minister, appeared to view the Hay'a as a vehicle for his political comeback. Although he has denied any ambition to become Prime Minister again, he has also left the possibility open, saying that he would do so "only if the people demand that."<sup>256</sup>

However, Al-Maliki's bid for power could generate discontent among some warlords and politicians.

One Member of Parliament, for example, argued that the corruption that had characterized the former Prime Minister's time in office would now reemerge with Al-Maliki's return; and Al-Sadr, for his part, vehemently rejected Al-Maliki, reminding his audience that the latter had been responsible for the Army's collapse and warning that none of Al-Sadr's followers would participate in the Hay'a under the latter, while suggesting that Al-Sistani select a leader instead.<sup>257</sup> Al-Sistani and Al-Ammar's Supreme Islamic Council have also opposed Al-Maliki, while there have been contradictory reports on Iran's stand. Al-Ibadi, who no doubt views Al-Maliki as a serious challenger to his own position, also opposed Al-Maliki's candidacy, reminding the latter that "I am the commander of the Hashd . . . and no one else," and reportedly threatened to cut off pay to the militias if the latter sided with Al-Maliki.<sup>258</sup> Nevertheless political in-fighting around the Hay'a is likely to continue and Al-Maliki may yet strike a deal.

### **The Complexities of Demobilization.**

Once the ISIS threat is eliminated or recedes, many in Iraq would like to see the recently expanded militias restructured, reduced in size, or, if possible, even closed. A Kurdish politician, for example, was adamant that the Shia militias "must not remain armed once terrorism is eliminated."<sup>259</sup> Although it may be a question to be faced some time down the road, demobilizing the armed and experienced fighters in the militias will be a difficult undertaking for any Iraqi government, even if it were willing to do so.

As long as domestic power relations are not stabilized and a strong central government can affirm its

authority, militias are not likely to disappear, especially given the present structure of the government, with the militia-linked political parties as constituent embedded elements within the political system. Government officials linked to the warlords, as one might expect, promote their own militias as, for example, was the case of Deputy Prime Minister Baha' Al-Araji, who asserted that the victory achieved over ISIS in Jurf Al-Sakhr would not have been possible without the *Saraya Al-Salam*, his party's militia.<sup>260</sup> The government sought to appropriate money in the 2015 draft budget for the creation of 15,000 new jobs for militia fighters in the government sector, with another 20,000 personnel to be integrated into the Army as an inducement for an eventual demobilization.<sup>261</sup> However, given the sharp fall in the country's oil revenues, the proposal ran into legislative opposition, with some suggesting instead a parallel cheaper "reserve army." Cutting funds for the militias may be difficult, not least because of the presence of their mother parties in the Parliament. For example, Al-Wafa' li'l-Muqawama (the party of the *Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada'*) warned that any cuts would be a "red line" and pushed for even more money for 2015.<sup>262</sup> One Member of Parliament even proposed shifting money from the Department of Defense to the militias, arguing that the latter deserved to be rewarded.<sup>263</sup> As of January 2015, the budget proposal for 2015 year was to allot 1 trillion Dinars (\$780 million) for the militias.<sup>264</sup>

The United States, no doubt concerned about many of the negative dynamics that have emerged, has reportedly sought to curb the militias. Some local news reports, in fact, claimed that the United States at one point asked Prime Minister Al-Ibadi to replace untrained and ideologically partisan militia forces in

the Baghdad area — then representing roughly half the city's force structure — with regular forces.<sup>265</sup> However, while on a visit to the United States in October 2014, Prime Minister Al-Ibadi noted that he had “made clear” to President Barack Obama what the militias' role was and the need to support the latter, as they were “the backbone of the fight against ISIS.”<sup>266</sup> That position had not changed in 2015, as Al-Ibadi reportedly had refused outright a visiting U.S. Senator's request that the militias be disbanded.<sup>267</sup>

Significantly, rivalry among the warlords could increase sharply and lead to further violence once the ISIS threat recedes, particularly if there is a weak government or if the warlords are embedded in the government and seek greater control of the latter. In the past, some militias have clashed openly, as was the case between Al-Sadr's followers and the *Ahl Al-Haqq*, itself an offshoot from Al-Sadr's *Jaysh Al-Mahdi* parent organization, with the two militias competing for the same personnel. To be sure, an imminent ISIS threat induced greater cooperation among the Shia militias. For example, even Al-Sadr and *Ahl Al-Haqq*'s commander, Al-Khazali, announced they would be cooperating, despite their past enmity, which had included armed clashes on Sadr's home ground of Sadr City as late as 2013.<sup>268</sup>

Nevertheless, competition remains just below the surface, and small-scale incidents suggest ongoing tensions. For example, one unit sponsored by the Ataba in Najaf complained that, while it was operating in Samarra, the *Badr* unit there ordered that it subordinate itself to the latter, otherwise, it would get no pay and be forced to leave.<sup>269</sup> In January 2015, an armed clash broke out in Baghdad between two small militias, probably over control of turf.<sup>270</sup> Competition

for lucrative assets could also pit rival warlords, as was the case between *Badr* and the Supreme Islamic Council for control of the Baghdad airport.<sup>271</sup> Typically, Al-Sadr's party accused the Minister of the Interior (a leading figure in *Badr*) of favoring his own party when he removed the chief of police in Basra and replaced the latter with a *Badr* member.<sup>272</sup> Competition could become even more violent and destabilizing than in the past, especially since the militias' acquisition of combat experience, additional recruits, and new weaponry as part of the ISIS War.

Convincing militia forces to relinquish control in areas where they have operated may be difficult, and Qays Al-Khazali, leader of the *Ahl Al-Haqq*, flatly stated that his men would not leave the areas they liberated.<sup>273</sup> The militias even seized some contested territory in Al-Anbar and annexed it to Karbala and Babil provinces, reversing the earlier reallocations of territory when Saddam had shifted provincial boundaries.<sup>274</sup> Similarly, disarming the militias of personal weapons as part of demobilization would be unrealistic, given the country's gun culture and continuing insecurity and, particularly as even heavy weapons now seem to have seeped down to the tribes.<sup>275</sup>

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR LANDPOWER AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

While one cannot predict what Iraq will look like in the future, over the coming months, Iraqi forces in all their forms, and supported by the Coalition, will likely retake some of the territory lost to ISIS earlier and push back, if not eliminate, the ISIS threat. What is significant in terms of the warlords and their militias is that the ongoing ISIS War is affording them

an unprecedented level of legitimacy within the Shia community. The warlords can now point not only to Al-Sistani's original fatwa as a basic source of legitimacy, but also can rely on the widespread gratitude for their achievements from all sectors of Shia society and on the country's continuing need for their services. In fact, Baghdad and Maysan province are already in the process of building memorials to fallen militia fighters. While the militias' names or administrative and organizational structures may change, the militia phenomenon is not likely to disappear in the near future, and the warlords will remain players in both the security sphere and in politics. Moreover, as America's de facto co-belligerents, the warlords and the militias have become a factor that can have a significant impact on U.S. interests and, therefore, represent a dimension that the United States must take into consideration both at the political and operational levels.

Based on the preceding analysis, a number of recommendations for U.S. policy and Landpower interests emerge in relation to Iraq's Shia warlords and their militias, with implications for decisionmakers and operators. Policymakers, planners, and operators must understand that the militias are not simply military forces, but that the warlords who lead the militias are also political and often religious leaders and that their power extends into Parliament as well as into the local administration. Prime Minister Al-Ibadi oversees a coalition government in which warlords and the parties and militias they control constitute a significant element, and the Prime Minister operates with limited maneuver space and may not always be able to achieve certain political goals or implement certain policies. If the warlords believe the United States is favoring other sectarian or ethnic communities at the

expense of the Shia, this could be reflected in militia hostility toward U.S. personnel.

As the U.S. Landpower footprint increases, planners and commanders must remain sensitive to the integrated position the warlords and the militias have in Iraq's security system, and understand that the militias are embedded in military operations with the Army and police. As such, their presence and influence must be considered in U.S. decisionmaking, and the appropriate conditions and limits on operational cooperation, intelligence sharing, and logistic support to the Iraqi forces must be determined. U.S. personnel must be vigilant to maintain operational security, a situation that will be complicated by the embedded nature of the militias within the Iraqi security forces, including in operations rooms, as leaks of future plans by militia sources have been common.<sup>276</sup> Operators must be aware that, within the Iraqi military and police, there are likely to be militia veterans, as well as members or sympathizers of the political or religious organizations that sponsor the militias, or relatives, or fellow-tribesmen of fighters in the militias.

Policymakers and operators must keep in mind the militias' links with Iran and remember that Iranian hostility to U.S. policies or a degradation in U.S.-Iranian relations could increase the risk to deployed personnel, whether on a combat mission or in support, which could be exacerbated by a history of long-standing militia hostility toward U.S. forces from earlier clashes. In light of the militias' Iranian connection and likely recruitment of key Iraqi militia individuals over the years, the militias are likely to collect intelligence on behalf of the Iranians—as well as for their own benefit—on U.S. operations, communications, combat systems, and intelligence methods and sources.



Operators must ensure that effective deconfliction with the militias is treated as a priority, even if only indirectly. The possibility of friendly fire involving the militias could have serious repercussions both in the field and in the political arena. In particular, if the number of U.S. forward air controllers remains limited, reliance on local sources—including militias or their supporters or enemies—for airpower targeting may not always be reliable, and care must be exercised in ensuring congruence with U.S. objectives. Insofar as possible, personnel should be prepared to deal with incidents and confrontations with militia personnel that could otherwise escalate quickly, given the background hostility, or be inflated and distorted for propaganda purposes. In addition, U.S. operators must be aware that elements favorable or hostile to the militias could seek to use information to influence U.S. targeting decisions, with potentially serious consequences.

Planners should develop easy-to-use recognition guides to distinguish the prodigious array of militia logos, flags, and uniforms (which, in some cases, may resemble those worn by the Iraqi Army or police), and include images of the militias' leadership. This will facilitate evaluating likely policies affecting U.S. operations and guard against potential threats.

Landpower operators may have to plan for additional force protection measures for Coalition partners and contractors—including armed ones who often operate with little outside control—whose numbers are likely to increase and who may be in contact with militia elements. Even though this is not strictly a U.S. Government responsibility, nevertheless, the reality on the ground could present a policy and operational dilemma.

Policymakers and operators must promote any rehabilitation of former Baathists – whether in the political realm or on the ground – carefully, understanding the sensitivity this issue represents for the militias and for the Shia community at large, as they or their families may have been victims of some of the same individuals seeking reintegration.

The U.S. Government and Department of Defense should monitor the militias' media, and operators should develop a robust information capability to counter that media's negative anti-Coalition message which, if not neutralized, could shape public opinion and could affect operations and force protection for personnel on the ground. Personnel must keep in mind that most militias have well-developed media and religious networks that can spread libelous accusations quickly. The often factionalized local government cannot always provide such message security. Military personnel must be prepared to deal with the moral dilemmas they may well face if they witness the mistreatment of civilians or prisoners by the militias.

## ENDNOTES

1. "Qiyadi *Badr*: 3 alaf muqatil min sarayana sa-yahsimun marakat Al-Falluja fi 48 saa bi-amr Al-Maliki" ("A *Badr* Commander: 3,000 of Our Troops will Decide the Battle for Falluja in 48 Hours If Al-Maliki Orders It"), Baghdad, Iraq: Iraqi Women's League, April 20, 2014, available from [www.iraqiwomensleague.com/mod.php?mod=news&modfile=item&itemid=25252](http://www.iraqiwomensleague.com/mod.php?mod=news&modfile=item&itemid=25252).

2. *Ibid.*

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275. In the eastern part of Baghdad, Al-Rusafa, more than 1,000 were reportedly hit by stray gunfire from citizens celebrating a win by the country’s soccer team at the Asia Cup, and the con-

certed effort in 2015 by the government, the media, and religious and tribal authorities to stem such gunfire is not likely to succeed any more than in the past. "Akthar min 1000 isaba fi Al-Rusafa bi-intilaqat nariya ihtifalan bi-fawz Al-Iraq" ("More Than 1,000 Hit by Gunfire in Al-Rusafa in the Celebration of Iraq's Victory"), *Buratha News Agency*, January 23, 2015, available from [burathanews.com/news/257748.html](http://burathanews.com/news/257748.html). During an inter-tribal fight in January 2015, the Army noticed that the tribes, too, now had heavy weapons, "Al-Niza al-asha'iri fi Al-Fadiliya kashaf an asliha thaqila sharqi Baghdad" ("The Tribal Dispute in Al-Fadiliya Revealed Heavy Weapons East of Baghdad"), *Al-Masdar News*, January 29, 2015, available from [l-news.net/index.php/safety/69617.html](http://l-news.net/index.php/safety/69617.html).

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